

Story 1: Incident at Bakenekoya

Chapter 1

Ukiyoe First Street is an entertainment street.

Whether human or youkai, there will be times when they would want to party and stuff themselves, do anything they wish and release pent up frustration.

After passing by the stage where the Snake Lady stands guard with snakes on her shoulders, and walking another hundred metres through a small alley on Bakeneko Street, the largest restaurant with exotic dishes for youkai, the “Bakenekoya”, will be around here.

The interior of the restaurant is vast, with high walls and no ceiling. A mass of long corridors go around the whole restaurant.

That night, the party booths on the first floor and along the corridors of the upper floors are packed with youkai. The store is filled with laughter and chatting voices, as well as loud partying and continuous orders for food, giving off a carefree youki.

--Good, this is good.

The one who spoke is the boss of the First Street—the leader of the Bakeneko Clan, Ryota Neko. While attending to the customers, he also observed the busy scene in the store with narrowed eyes.

The customers have returned. As the boss, he was naturally happy at the prosperous scene before him.

It has already been many days since the battle against the assassins from the Shikoku Kingdom, Tamazuki.

During the war, Ryota Neko continued running his business without any breaks. When Tamazuki's parade of 88 youkai arrived in Ukiyoe Town, their first target had been this Bakenekoya. They first tore Bakenekoya apart, and caused trouble in the surrounding area. In a short time, Ukiyoe was filled with a murderous atmosphere, and the sights and sounds of drunk patrons could not be heard anymore.

The Kyuso Clan was chased away after much difficulty, and the Shikoku just charged in. Ryota neko was deeply saddened by that.

I have to think of a way. I need to think of a way for Bakeneko Street to prosper like before. But the Bakeneko Clan is not a fighting clan and could not do anything even if they wanted to, except to wait anxiously on the sidelines.

During the final battle, Ryota Neko was not present. He heard from the Main House that the battle was fierce, and both sides had their commanders and subordinates fighting each other, an all out battle.

In the end, it was the Nura Gumi who won this war, and the Inugamigyobu Tanuki and Tamazuki retreated to Shikoku. As for the Bakenekoya now, as seen, the customers have returned.

He felt so thankful. Ryota Neko was so grateful that the only thing he didn't manage to do was to pray in the direction of the Main House.

He had not even thanked the Young Master Rikuo or any of his subordinates.

Tonight then, thought Ryota Neko. I'll leave the store to my subordinates, and pay a visit to the Main House. Just as Ryota Neko made up his mind, he was stopped by a voice...

"Yo, Ryota Neko!"

Ryota Neko turned towards the deep bass voice, and lifted his eyes a little, to see a man with blue monk robes--Aotabou—watching him. Kurotabou, Kejorou, Kubanashi, Tsurara and Kappa were standing at the side as well.

"Aotabou! And everyone!"

"There's me too!"

Natto Kazo jumped on the nearby table as he said that to Ryota Neko who was happy to see them.

"Welcome! I was about to go to the Main House to show my appreciation, what a coincidence!"

"What's there to thank, there's no need to be so reserved."

Yuki-onna Tsurara laughed lightly with her face buried in her scarf.

"That's right. Instead of lowering your head to thank us at the Main House, why don't you let us have a good meal and drink here? There's good wine today, right?"

Aotabou mimicked the action of holding a wine cup and brought it to his mouth.

"That's so gross, Aotabou, that action is just like an old geezer."

Kejorou turned up her nose and mocked him.

"Oh shut up."

Aotabou glared at Kejorou.

"The business today is really good."

Kubinashi stood at the side, observing the interior of the restaurant, head bobbing lightly.

"I'm so thirsty..."

The one who moaned was Kappa.

"Ryota Neko, are there any seats?"

Kurotaou asked quietly. Ryota Neko answered immediately and energetically.

“Of course, no problem! Let me guide you to your seats!”

Chapter 2

The subordinates were guided to a back room, which was a partly a lounge room. Ryota Neko once guided the Young Master and a female classmate to this seat as well.

Another staff wearing a headscarf tied in a similar fashion quickly served up high quality wine and food.

“Good work this time as well. Because of all your work, the Bakenekoya was able to open for business again. Thank you very much everyone!”

Ryota Neko gave a deep bow from the tableside to the group of youkai.

“I already said not to be so reserved. We only came here to eat.”

Aotabou said to Ryota Neko with a large swipe of his hand.

“No no, I must thank all of you properly. I heard the battle with Shikoku was especially difficult, everyone must be tired right? Please relax and rest tonight!”

“It may be something like that, but Kuro didn’t do anything at all.”

Hearing what Kappa said under his voice, Kurotabou’s eyes widened.

“Hey hey, Kappa, I cannot act as if I didn’t not hear that at all! That night, I did kill 17, 18 of them. I sliced whoever I saw, killed whoever I saw, just like a flying blade—”

“It was all a bunch of small fry.”

Tsurara replied coldly.

“What do you mean by ‘small fry’! Then again, I was the one who defeated Sodemogi --”

“After defeating Sodemogi-sama, Kokehime sent a letter to thank you, right? This is already the third time I heard about this.”

After being interrupted by Kejorou, the offended Kurotabou turned towards Ryota Neko, trying to act like he didn’t mind at all.

“Let’s have a toast first. Ryota Neko, can you keep us company for a while?”

A smiling Ryota Neko, who watched the actions of the youkai, replied with a “Then I respectfully accept” and held up his own wine cup.

“Good, in conclusion, good work everyone!”

Aotabou said while drinking.

“Besides Kuro.”

Kappa added.

“Don’t exclude me!”

Kurotabou’s angry reply only served to heighten the atmosphere. The youkai raised their cups in unison.

Ryota Neko, holding a wine cup in one hand, felt something deeply.

-- The aura around the people from the Main House was really amazing.

As youkai, their nature is to gather “Fear” with evil deeds, and winning in fights to expand their influence. But if they focus on doing that every single day, life would be so bland for them. Occasionally, they should forget about all the fighting and killing, and have good fun drinking with their companions. With the permission from the Supreme Commander Nurarihyon and his grandson, Young Master Rikuo, they created this sort of atmosphere in the Nura Gumi, Ryota Neko really liked this feeling.

The youkai who had been lively before, became even more so after the toast.

After the big battle, the group of youkai who have been freed from the battlefield are even more talkative than usual.

Just as the table was filled with never ending conversation, Kappa opened his mouth to speak...

“Oh yes, ever since I became Young Master’s bodyguard, I had the impression that humans really like to reproduce.”

Faced with such a “spicy” declaration, Ryota Neko couldn’t help but widen his eyes. Kappa’s “reproduce” seemed to refer to the human’s “love confession”.

During the time when the number of bodyguards around Rikuo were increased in response to the attacks from Shikoku, Kappa disguised as a middle school student and joined the ranks of the bodyguards. The location which he was in charge of was the roof.

“—Didn’t I mention before that I once saw Young Master’s childhood friend getting confessed to? That backyard might just be a specialized place for confessions. Besides that girl, there are other girls who confessed or are confessed to there. But isn’t school a place meant for studying? Why did it become like they come to school in order to confess...the extreme is not only does it happen between students, there are even cases where the targets are adults.”

The youkai who were listening all gave a “What?” expression of surprise.

Kappa continued to speak...

“At first I thought that boy was confessing to a female teacher, but after a closer look, the female teacher had really extravagant dressing, not like a teacher at all. In the end, that lady...was actually Kejorou.”

“Why was it you!”

Aotabou retorted. (translator’s note: kind of like playing the straight man)

“During that sort of dire situation, and you still get confessed to!”

Tsurara retorted as well.

“My pheromones spread naturally, and so I was confessed to, I can’t help it either—Ah, but I rejected it, okay. Besides Rikuo-sama, I have no interest in other young boys.”

Kejorou stared at the nail polish on her hands, and smiled with a very womanly expression.

“I can’t stand flirts like you...”

Tsurara humph-ed, and her tone sounded icy.

“Ah, on the topic of being bodyguards, something happened to me as well.”

This time it was Kubinashi’s turn to speak. The youkai focused their attention to the floating head.

“I forgot when it happened, it might be when Young Master was having his lessons. I was patrolling round the school grounds, and as I was about to walk towards the Sports Hall, I suddenly heard someone shout “Watch out!”, and immediately after that, a volleyball hit my head. At that time, it did not feel painful at all, I was just shocked. After that a miracle happened, that volleyball landed on top of my body, and my head hit the ground. (Translator’s note: In short, the volleyball replaced his head). A girl wearing a PE uniform ran over and after saying “Sorry.”, she picked up my head and ran off.”

“Really?!”

Aotabou asked with a loud voice.

“Haha, this is funny!”

Tsurara laughed.

“And? What happened after that?” Kurotabou asked.

“After that, as the girl turned to return to the Sports Hall, she realized that something was wrong quite quickly, and with a scream, and threw my head away, and it landed above me. That was how my head got returned.”

“Really?!”

“Haha, this is funny!”

“And? What happened after that?”

“Yeah, after that, the girl was so shocked that her legs turned to jelly. She thought she picked up a volleyball, and it actually was a human head, of course she will freak out. I couldn’t leave her alone seeing her in that state, so I picked up the ball and returned it to her, and asked, “Are you okay? Did you have a nightmare?” Then, the girl just continued staring at me, then passed me a slip of paper, and said, “This is my handphone number.....”.”

That concludes Kubinashi’s story. Aotabou let out an angry shout, breaking the silence.

“What kind of ending is this? In the end all you wanted to say is that you were chased by someone too.”

The lightly floating head just smiled, and didn't say anything, like he was satisfied being able to say that story.

“All of you people always tell such boring stories. Are there any thrilling, suspenseful stories, with content I like?”

“Ah, can I tell one then? My story should be more exciting than theirs.”

The one who raised his hand is the one sitting on three layers of seat cushions, Natto Kazo. If not for the three layers of seat cushions, no one would be able to see him at all.

“Okay Natto, You better not say anything boring!”

After Natto Kazo nodded at Aotabou who warned him repeatedly, he started to tell his story...

“When all of you were accompanying Young Master, I followed the Supreme Commander to Shikoku. Then as we took the train* back with the Inugamigyobu leader, something happened. (*Note: there was a train name, but I don't know how to translate it)

The train connects the capital and Shikoku and had sleeping quarters. Having something happen on a train with sleeping quarters on the way back to headquarters sounded like a setting from a thriller detective story, so all the youkai listened to the story attentively.

“The incident happened in our carriage. Not long after leaving the station, all the other guests started to become restless. They detected a strange smell, and thought it was odd, and started to theorise if a dangerous substance was placed on the train, and they were being attacked by terrorists...”

“A terrorist attack?”

Aotabou's voice raised in pitch.

Natto Kazo nodded, and continued...

“...The passengers made a bigger and bigger fuss about it, and so the staff came to handle the situation, immediately noticed the strange smell as well, and said ‘this stink is too strange, what in the world is it...everyone, please move to the other carriages!’, so everyone moved to the other carriages. But the strange thing is, the strange smell was there as well! I was so nervous that my legs were trembling, and I thought this might be a youkai spell set by Tamazuki's subordinates to get rid of us. My back was covered in sweat because of fear and I'm not sure if I was over thinking things, but the strange smell was getting stronger. Thinking about it, the stink was really bad, just like the stink of fermented beans...you guys should have figured it out by now, right? Yes, the stink that they were talking about was the Natto smell on me!”

Hearing that sort of conclusion to Natto Kazo's story, everyone fell over into a pile. Aotabou got up and shouted..

“Yes, my foot! In the end it was just you spreading your Natto smell on the train!”

“Don’t you feel that this story is very warming?”

Natto Kazo sat on his cushions, chuckling, and with a “Ah”, he elaborated..

“Oh yes—I suddenly remembered, telling stories like this, doesn’t it remind you of that television show? The one where names will be on dice, and the onewho’s name got rolled on the dice will have to tell a story ‘Matsuki Hitoshi interesting tales’!” (Translator’s note: A variety show in Japan, the host is Hitoshi Matsuki)

“Yeah--” all the youkai agreed. But Kejourou immediately said...

“This analogy isn’t wrong, but Natto Kazo, you’re still a youkai, and should have used “The Hundred Youkai Tales” as an analogy, and not a television show, right?”

“Yeah--” all the youkai agreed again.

The Hundred Tales is a way to tell ghost stories. Every time a ghost story is finished, an oil lamp will be blown out. Legends say that once the 100th oil lamp is blown out, a youkai will appear.

“Is it possible that the more we say, the Blue Lamp Ghost (Aoandou) will appear?”

Ryota Neko asked.

“I’m not sure about that.”

Kejourou answered with a sinister smile.

The number of spirits that resulted from The Hundred Tales come in many forms, one of those would be the ‘Aoandou’. Legend says if blue paper was used to make the oil lamps used for the Hundred Tales meeting, the oil lamps will extinguish by themselves, and a long haired female ghost ‘Aoandou’ will appear at the same time.

“It probably won’t go so far as to making Aoandou appear. But by taking turns to tell stories like this, a youkai might really appear in front of us.”

Kejourou looked up and said that with a sinister expression. After hearing that, Natto Kazo’s head, wrapped by straw, started to tremble.

“It can’t be, don’t scare me like that...”

“idiot, what are you afraid of!”

Aotabou immediately directed a punch at Natto Kazo.

“Are you still a youkai of the Nura Gumi! Have more courage!”

“But...”

“Relax! We aren’t even telling ghost stories now, and not lighting any lamps either.”

Tsurara rolled her eyes, and comforted Natto Kazo while smiling. Just then—

“Excuse me.....”

A low voice was heard.

“Aoandou appeared!”

Natto Kazo jumped, the nearby youkai also recoiled, shoulders shaking.

A shadow slowly approached the table. It was one of the members of the Bakeneko Clan.

“Bastard! What kind of dead expression are you giving! Trying to scare someone?”

“I didn’t mean to scare big brother intentionally, I just wanted to report something.....”

Ryota Neko’s ears twitched.

“What is it?”

“Yes, it’s the gambling den upstairs.....”

Chapter 3

The Bakeneko Clan was originally a gambling organization. So besides operating a restaurant, they also have another side—

The gambling den which opens every night.

The gambling den is located upstairs, isolated from the noise caused by drunk customers. After walking through the long corridor, it is two Japanese style halls separated by paper sliding doors.

The Bakeneko gambling den has youkai poker as well as Odd Even. (Translator’s note: the game is where you roll two dice, and guess if the number rolled is odd or even.)

The tatami is covered with a white cloth, and on top of it, a dice dish is placed, the youkai who are gambling surround this space and guess if the dice show even or odd and use a rather modern looking tablet (a rectangular wooden board) to bet.

After the youkai in charge of rolling the dice has rolled the dice, the container containing the dice will be lifted and the number called. Some youkai will cheer, the others will grumble. The tablets will come and go on the dice dish, and the air is filled with barely suppressed emotions and passion. This is also the main source of income for the Bakeneko Clan.

“What happened?” Ryota Neko asked.

According to the staff member who came down from the gambling den, there was a customer who would win every round, and it was really strange.

“It really isn’t normal, it’s like the guy has prediction abilities, and could guess it correctly every time. During the period I observed him, he has already won 8 rounds. The other customers saw how

accurate he was and started to bet on the same guesses as him, and we could not get enough tablets at all.”

When betting odd even, if the number of tablets on both sides are not the same number, the game cannot be started. In order to come up with the matching number of tablets, the side which has less tablets would need to top up the amount, or the side with more tablets remove away some amount, or the dealer tops up the missing amount. This means, the more complicated the rules, the easier it is for something to go wrong when it is played.

“What kind of person is he?”

Ryota Neko asked.

“He looks like a normal old man. It might that he disguised as a human...”

“Could he a cheater?”

Ryota Neko is referring to a cheater who fools others.

The staff member tilted his head, unsure.

“I’m not too sure. And I don’t get the feeling that he is able to fool the eyes of big sister who rolls the dice...”

The member of the Bakeneko Clan who rolls the dice is a very experienced female, and her skills at rolling the dice are well honed, Ryota Neko trusts her a lot as well.

“Can big brother come take a look?”

The group member asked, weakly.

By leaving an unnatural gambler alone, it would be harder to justify to the other gamblers. And if the news that the gambling den of the Bakenekoya does not investigate cheating cases spread, it will harm the image of the Nura Gumi.

Ryota Neko narrowed his eyes, and stood up.

“Okay, let’s go.”

After bidding farewell to Aotabou and the rest, Ryota Neko headed to the gambling den together with the clan member.

Walking up the stairs, and through the dim corridor, Ryota Neko reached the hall with a faint glow from the lights.

The youkai customer and the lady who rolls the dice are currently staring at each other from across the dice dish. Sitting on the floor with her back to the partition, she is wearing a kimono, showing half her shoulder and her cloth binded chest. Of course, this lady is also a youkai, a Neko-mata. Her hair is brushed back in a loose ponytail, and cat ears are on either side of her head. It may be because she is tense, but her cat ears are perked upwards. (Translator’s note: Very old cats who turn into youkai are known as Neko-mata)

Seeing Ryota Neko appear from behind the partition, the lady who rolls the dice glanced in his direction, with a rather stiff expression on her face. Ryota Neko quietly sat down next to her and observed the customers facing them.

Very quickly, Ryota Neko could tell which customer was the one with an unnatural number of wins. A person would not be able to win that big an amount based off the normal odds of winning, and the only person the dice rolling lady was facing had an unbelievable pile of tablets next to him. His appearance is really like that of a normal looking old man, wearing a black suit and a white open collar shirt, giving others an impression of a unorthodox policeman or a gangster. But all these are just a distraction. He didn't mask his youki at all, and is definitely a youkai. But it is hard to tell what kind of youkai he is solely from his youki.

The round was paused halfway, and this break seemed to have gone on for some time. The man grew impatient...

"What wrong, lady? Isn't rolling the dice your job?"

"That's right, just roll already!" the other youkai also joined in. If they followed the bet of this person, it would definitely be correct, of course they would want the victor to be decided quickly.

"Sir, you seem to be enjoying yourself a lot."

Ryota Neko shifted his attention onto the man.

"Who are you?"

"Please excuse me. I am the boss of the Bakeneko Clan, Ryota Neko. It's nice to meet you."

"To have the boss come and watch my match, I'm really sorry about that. I am having a lot of fun."

The man replied while stroking his messy beard.

"Oh yeah, boss, you should help me say something about this. I'm not sure if she's scared stiff or what, but this lady over here kept refusing to roll the dice."

"Seeing how much you won, anyone rolling the dice will be scared."

"I just got lucky today. You can say that I have a Spirit of Luck following me, and it's especially effective in youkai gambling dens."

Having said that, the man gave a sly smile.

"I will have her roll the dice."

Ryota Neko said in a light tone of voice.

"But only you and the one who rolls the dice can continue playing, just to two of you."

The lady who rolls the dice looked shocked, and the other patrons started shouting as well...

"Hey hey hey, what kind of joke is this?"

“Let us play too!”

“Why a one-on-one match?”

“Everyone, I’m very sorry, I know this is very rude, and rather unreasonable. But--”

Ryota Neko continued with a stronger tone.

“Please understand and cooperate. If you haven’t gotten enough of playing, there are other rooms where you can gamble as well.”

It might be because they were overwhelmed by Ryota Neko’s tone, or they were just curious about how this gambling match will end, but even though they were not completely satisfied, the voices of protests have gotten softer.

Ryota Neko faced the problem customer once again.

“Sir, are you accepting of this?”

“Luck follows me, so I don’t really mind either way.”

The man smiled arrogantly.

Ryota Neko leaned towards the rolling dice lady slightly, and whispered a few sentences.

“I’m counting on you.”

“It’ll definitely be guessed correctly.”

The lady whispered back.

“No matter. I just want to see how he bets.”

He just wants to see through the man’s tricks.

Even though the member was not sure if cheating tactics were used, but from his unnatural winning streak, there’s obviously something suspicious going on. But without evidence, it would be difficult to get him to admit his crime without catching him in the act.

I need to use my own eyes to capture the truth.

The lady rolling the dice did not say much. She exhaled to pace her breathing, and focused her attention on the opponent. As expected of a veteran, even by adjusting her emotions, you can see the skill she has. The lady quickly got into good form and started to roll the dice. Container in her right hand, two dice between her fingers on her left hand, she then crossed both hands.

Ryota Neko continued observing the problem customer.

The man’s expression is rather vague, devoid of any feeling, no aura can be felt from him as well. He crossed both legs with his hands in his lap.

“Are you ready? Okay...I’m rolling the dice.”

After saying that, the lady threw the dice into the container. The dice can be heard bouncing inside the container.

In the middle of the dice dish, there is a one inch thick straw mat. After rolling the dice, the container will be inverted on top of it.

At that moment, the man yawned. This guy, acting so relaxed, Ryota Neko glared at him.

Ryota Neko focused all his attention on every action the man made, especially where he was looking at.

Whether there was a youkai that can see through objects, Ryota Neko was not sure about that at all. However, even if they do exist, the container was laced with a spell that can prevent others from seeing through it, so trying to see through the container is impossible.

Even if it was not seeing through objects, the other actions must be something that can be seen with the naked eye. Ryota Neko's goal is those instantaneous movements.

But then, the man just narrowed his eyes a bit. With regards to just the eyes, it can be only considered as an action, that is all. After that, the man haphazardly grabbed a handful of tablets and threw them on the plate.

"I bet even."

The man said in a light tone.

The lady opened the container.

"Two and six...even!"

Hearing the tone in the lady's voice, the man laughed loudly.

The tablets won were pushed towards the man. If it was cashed in, the amount will be equal to the monthly salary of 10 of the Bakenekoya's staff.

'Continue', Ryota Neko gave a glance to the lady, giving her such a signal.

The lady turned back to the front, picked up the container and the dice, and started her actions.

The dice were thrown into the container, and the noise of the dice bouncing in the container can be heard, then the container was inverted.

Ryota Neko focused his attention on the man, but his expression was the same as before, not one change could be seen.

The man coughed lightly and threw down even more tablets compared to before.

"Even." He said

The lady lifted the container. The dice showed three and one respectively.

"Three and one, even."

The man laughed twice, and even more tablets were pushed to his side.

Sweat started to appear on Ryota Neko's forehead.

There were no strange actions at all. Besides placing the tablets on the plate, the man did not make other movements.

The container cannot be seen through. If it's not the container, it would be the dice. Did he exchange them in the confusion? That can't be, if something was done to the dice, it would be found out from touching the dice, the people rolling the dice cannot be that insensitive.

"What's wrong, boss?"

The man said.

"Did you find any evidence of me cheating?"

Instantly, Ryota Neko's gaze turned sharp. The man continued to speak, shamelessly...

"All of you thought I was cheating, that's why you asked your boss to come personally, and to see through my tricks, you proposed a one-on-one match. So, did you see anything?"

The way he said it is like admitting that he is using tricks and the challenge of "Try and catch me if you can" is rather obvious.

It was as if a string was plucked inside him, yet it was not a happy feeling at all. Ryota Neko exhaled slowly and said...

"From what I can see from observing from the side, there isn't anything suspicious."

"That's right. I am innocent after all."

"That might not be the case."

"Ah?"

"I said 'From what I can see from observing from the side'. Which means if I watch from the sidelines, there is no problem."

"What are you trying to get at?"

"There are some things that will be clear once we compete—sir, would you like to have a match with me?"

Chapter 4

--I did comment that you are rash once it comes to gambling, it looks like I was right.

The words which Young Master Rikuo said to him once echoed in his mind.

As the head of a group of gamblers, it was a given that he would like gambling – but to be described as 'rash', it sounded as if he didn't have a level head, and that irked him a bit.

There's no such thing! Rikuo-sama! I am calm when it comes to gambling. Ryota Neko defended himself while waiting for the man's answer.

"A match with you?"

The man raised an eyebrow, looking wary for the first time.

"Yes, a match with me. This is the first time I've seen one person win this much. If I let you go without playing against you, it would be such a pity. Please be so kind as to have a match with me."

The man thought for a few seconds, and nodded lightly.

"Okay, I'll have a match with you. How do you want it? Take turns rolling the dice?"

Having been asked such a question, it was Ryota Neko's turn to think.

This is a one-on-one match. Which means that the game can be played like how the man suggested it, which is to take turns rolling the dice to play the match. But, on the other hand, the man is hinting that even if that method is used to compete, he can still use his methods.

No, Ryota Neko shook his head.

"I will roll the dice, and you will guess the odd or even. If you guessed wrong, I win."

"Sure."

The man nodded. The way to conduct the match has been decided, just like that.

"Wow!" the audience started to make some commotion. A match between the mystery gambler with a never ending lucky streak and the boss of the Bakeneko Clan, seeing a match of such caliber would naturally cause others to feel fortunate and excited.

Ryota Neko changed places with the dice rolling lady, and sat across the man, with a dice dish between them.

The goal isn't winning, there is no need to concentrate on winning, the real goal is to find the moment where he cheats. One game might not be enough, but the actions should be obvious after two games or three games. As long as he grasped a weak point, he would be able to confiscate all the tablets, and chase this man out of the gambling den. Take things slowly, there's no need to rush. Ryota Neko licked his lips, and told this to himself.

"Then let's start."

After Ryota Neko said so, he picked up the container and the dice.

"Anytime you wish to start."

The man narrowed his eyes.

Ryota Neko placed one hand over the other and said to himself...

"Are you ready? Ready...start to roll the dice."

After rolling the dice for a while, Ryota Neko inverted the container on the mat with smooth movements.

Ryota Neko eyes meet the man's eyes, the battle starts now.

The man did not hesitate at all and placed a bet with the tablets. A large number of wooden tablets were stacked on the white cloth on top of the dice dish. Then the man said...

"...Odd"

Ryota Neko opened the container. The two dice showed four and three.

"Four and three, odd."

"Wow!" the audience chorused.

This does not count as anything, Ryota Neko tried to encourage himself. It's only the first battle, the opponent will give something away sooner or later.

"—Again."

Ryota Neko said another declaration of battle, and picked up the container and dice again.

After putting down the container, their gazes met, and their fighting spirits clashed. Then, the man picked up his tablets to bet.

"Odd."

Ryota Neko closed his eyes tightly and opened the container. The numbers are two and three.

"...two and three, odd."

Cheers can be heard from the audience, as well as the unintentional sigh from his members.

The number of tablets the man is now a lot more compared to when Ryota Neko first stepped into the room. If they were used as firewood, that amount would be enough to heat up bath water.

--With so much money, it would be enough to hire courtesans for three nights!

--Not only three nights, it'll be enough even for a week!

Envious voices could be heard from the onlookers, Ryota Neko, with his concentration disrupted by the surrounding noise, clicked his tongue.

The third round, the man bet on "Odd". The result was four and one, an odd number, and the man wins again.

Ever since he had a solo match with Ryota Neko, the man had won continuously for three rounds, including the two rounds with the rolling dice lady, Ryota Neko had already witnessed five victories from the man, but he could not expose the man's tricks at all.

Sweat soaked into the bandanna tied on Ryota Neko's head.

“...Bring me tea.”

Ryota Neko said to the member next to him.

“What?” the member asked.

“I want to drink tea!” Ryota Neko couldn’t take it and lost his temper.

Under a heavy atmosphere, Ryota Neko drank the cold tea that was served. On the other end, the man, who was also served cold tea drank the tea, like he was enjoying it thoroughly.

Calm down, don’t get nervous, this guy must be a cheater. If not for that, how would he be able to win so much. If it’s not cheating tactics...then what would it be? Is it because his intuition is especially good? How can that be possible!

I need to capture the moment where the tactic is used, just once is enough. The problem is...how?

Ryota Neko, who answered his own questions, suddenly had a flash of inspiration and an idea.

--Let’s try that, shall we?

Seeing the situation now, he would not obtain any clues just continuing like this.

No choice but to try it then.

After formulating a plan, Ryota Neko regained his calmness.

Ryota Neko passed the empty tea cup back to the staff member, and cracked a few finger joints.

“Let’s continue?”

The man nodded, and Ryota Neko picked up the container and dice.

He decided to use ‘that technique’, which is to roll the numbers which he wants.

Two dice have 36 permutations and 21 totals, Ryota Neko can roll any combination he chooses.

There are no mechanisms in the dice or the container. Ryota Neko simply adjusts the way the dice is thrown and how the container is shook to get the number he wants. This is the result of years and months of practice, you could say it is a skill.

The first three are all odds. This is not because of Ryota Neko’s tampering, it was all a coincidence.

Ryota Neko decided to roll an odd. Numbers that will add up to an odd number...let’s go with five and six.

After deciding the numbers, Ryota Neko started to shake the dice.

The dice in the container become images in Ryota Neko’s mind. Five, six, five six...

“--!”

With upmost concentration, Ryota Neko inverted the container.

This time, Ryota Neko was quite confident. The stationary dice inside the container are definitely going to be a odd number, five and six.

Their gazes met. At that moment, the man seemed the sense the change in atmosphere, and his expression became alert.

“...Even.”

Ryota Neko’s expression did not change, but inside, he is smiling evilly.

Finally I get to this moment, you guessed wrong. That means, this guy just happened to guess correctly this whole time? These thoughts flashed through Ryota Neko’s mind at that moment.

No matter what, he won this time, a relieved Ryota Neko opened up the container, but—

Ryota Neko almost stopped breathing, because the numbers on the dice were three and three.

“This--!”

How is this possible, I was so sure I rolled a five and six.

“Three pair, even...”

His voice who announced the results shook a little. Ryota Neko lifted his head and looked at the man.

“Haha!”

The man who sat cross legged laughed. Ryota Neko started to see things, like the lazy build of the man increasing in size.

Chapter 5

Ryota Neko knew very well, even if he used the technique to roll any number he desired, it did not mean that he would be able to expose the opponent’s tricks. But doing nothing will only cause him to lose more and more, why not try something to change the atmosphere a little. That was Ryota Neko’s goal.

But the technique that was supposed to succeed actually failed.

Ryota Neko was always proud of his perfect technique, but he suffered a setback this time, and this caused his mental state to waver.

--Was it due to the poor control of the fingers? Or the way the dice was rolled? No, it can’t be.

“Boss, you look pale, you know that?”

The man commented with a smile on his face. It might be because the victories simulated the blood circulation in his body, but his complexion looks a lot better.

This youkai, what are his origins?

Now that the game has progressed to this state, Ryota Neko was finally curious about the true identity of the man. He is actually out of the normal range of a cheater. What kind of youkai skills does he use?

“Do you want to give up?”

The man’s voice bought Ryota Neko back to his senses.

“Don’t...don’t joke with me, it’s still too early for that.”

“Leader, please don’t play anymore!”

The member next to him pleaded, a desperate tone in his voice.

“You should back off, it’s no use even if you continued.”

The lady advised while shaking her head.

“What are you talking about? I can still do it!”

Ryota Neko grabbed the container and dice, breathing out.

He must be screwed up just now. He’ll try to control the numbers one more time.

A series of actions, saying the opening lines, putting down the container. Ryota Neko came up with the odd number consisting of five and two.

The man bet on ‘Even’ without any hesitation. Opening the container, it was four and two, and the sum is an even number. It happened again, the numbers were changed. Ryota Neko felt his world was turned upside down.

It wasn’t looking through objects, it wasn’t an accurate intuition, then it must be the ability to tell the future. If he wants odd, he will get odd, if he wants even, he will get even. It had nothing to do with Ryota Neko’s skills, the numbers inside the container will be what the man bet on.

Ryota Neko, who had not learnt his lesson, rolled the dice two more times, both using his ultimate skill, but the numbers were still changed, and the man won. Since having a solo match with Ryota Neko, the man had won seven times consecutively.

Not only his bandana, even the cotton jacket he wore on his back was soaked with sweat.

Just as they entered the eight round, and Ryota Neko picked up the container and dice, rough footsteps could be heard in the room, then the sound approached Ryota Neko’s left side.

“Ryota Neko! Stop competing!”

The group of youkai which rushed to the side of the dice dish were the youkai from the Main House, led by Aotabou. They were originally drinking downstairs, but they might have heard someone say that Ryota Neko was in big trouble and ran upstairs to investigate.

“Oh, so the gambling den looked like this.”

Kappa just freely expressed what he felt, as usual, the other subordinates just looked at Ryota Neko with worried expressions on their faces.

“Isn’t it better if you just backed off?”

Kubinashi said.

“I think so too.”

Kurotabou agreed, nodding.

“How can I...”

How can I back off—Ryota Neko protested in his mind. I lost so badly, how can I just run away with my tail between my legs? The boss of the Bakeneko Clan actually let a man with mysterious origins just walk away with a huge amount of winnings, wouldn’t that just shame the Nura Gumi?

“Everyone from the Main House, thank you for your warning...but I can’t stop, I want to continue competing.”

“Bastard! You still want to compete after losing so much, are you out of your mind?”

Aotabou scolded fiercely.

“That’s right! Why do you push yourself so?”

Tsurara asked.

“Do you still want to compete, boss?”

The man who was watching everything unfold opened his mouth and said...

“I advise you to listen to them, since I have already won enough.”

“Sir, I do not need your pity. The Bakeneko Clan’s reputation is upheld by me, if I said that I’m not playing anymore, then what’s the point of challenging you to a solo match in the first place?”

“So you want to continue?”

“Of course.”

Seeing Ryota Neko nod, the youkai from the Main House let out a collective sigh.

“Okay, than how about this?”

“Only once, this is the last game. If we drag this on anymore, the audience would get sick of it, why don’t we raise the stakes for the last one...how about that?”

“The last game huh...”

Ryota Neko pondered about it while talking to himself. Being able to expose his tactics in just one game, to be honest, he wasn’t confident at all. But at least, he needed to win some tablets back.

Compared to playing cautiously continuously, maybe he would increase his chances of winning if he let loose all his abilities.

“That’s okay, I have no objections.”

Ryota Neko nodded, the man continued...

“The next thing is the bet.”

“Bet?”

“Yes, victory will depend on this round, I will not be so petty as to leave some leeway for myself. If I lose, all these tablets will be yours.”

Hearing his way of doing things, all the onlookers cheered. Even though it wasn’t their own bet, seeing such a large gamble, they were also satisfied.

“But--” the man continued to speak, and the audience quietened down.

“But if you lose...meaning if I guessed it correctly, I want the deed to your Bakenekoya.”

“De...deed?!”

Ryota Neko’s crazed shout caused a stream of cheers from the audience.

“Great! You did good!”

“It’s getting more and more interesting!”

There were even some youkai who did a wolf whistle.

“So, how about it?”

The man gave an arrogant smirk. Ryota Neko bowed his head and started to think.

The opponent’s tablet could make up a small mountain. If he bet everything and won, the amount he won would definitely be huge, enough to buy a small store...

But this Bakenekoya could not be given up so easily.

It’s not just the economic loss, the Bakenekoya is a symbol and front of the Nura Gumi. Letting a gangster gambler win it away so easily will harm the Nura Gumi’s image, and the story will go on for 10,000 years.

“Leader, please don’t play anymore!”

The members grabbed Ryota Neko’s shoulders. The grip was so hard that it was painful.

“You can’t win! The guy has not made any wrong guesses at all so far!”

Of course I know that. But my blood is boiling, and I just do not want to back down.

The lady placed both her hands on the tatami.

“Boss, please! Bakenekoya is Nura Gumi’s treasure, you have to consider it carefully!”

I know that too. But my blood is burning, and I just don’t want to run.

“Ryota Neko, wake up!”

“Yeah, wake up! Or else I’m going to beat you up!”

Kurotabou and Aotabou threatened.

“Kappa, throw a water ball at him! See if he wakes up from that!”

Kejorou shouted.

“Don’t make things difficult for me~”

Just as Kappa retorted warmly, the man continued...

“If you don’t want to compete, don’t do it. But you have already agreed to this last match. If you really want to pack up and leave, I will have no choice but to go to other places and tell others that the leader of the Bakeneko Clan is a coward that runs away at the last minute.”

“What did you say...I dare you to say it again!”

Ryota Neko half stood in reflex.

The man’s eyes glowed.

Ryota Neko took a deep breath, opened his eyes fully and shouted to the members next to him...

“We’ll have our match! Hey! Bring the deed over!”

Just as Ryota Neko crossed the line of no return—

“Rikuo-sama!”

Tsurara’s voice was suddenly heard.

Chapter 6

Flowing long hair, an aura that would cause others to shake uncontrollably, a black yukata and a blue haori. Night Rikuo appeared amongst the subordinates from the Main House.

“Ryota Neko, how did it go?”

“Young Master...”

Ryota Neko was about to ask how his body was holding up, but was beaten to it by Tsurara.

“Rikuo-sama! You have to continue your bed rest, how can you get out of bed! What if the wound Tamazuki gave you reopens!”

“Zen’s medicine was very effectively, it’s almost fully healed.

Rikuo answered while walking to the side of dice dish, smoking pipe in hand, towards Ryota Neko. The other members and the lady stood up and gave their spot to Rikuo.

Rikuo sat down next to Ryota Neko, saying...

"I only heard part of it, what is it? I heard that the last round has large stakes?"

"Yes..."

"Rikuo-sama, please say something to him! Tell him not to compete anymore!"

Tsurara sounded agitated, Aotabou followed, saying...

"Young Master, please lend a hand! If Ryota Neko loses, Bakenekoya will belong to that old man!"

Rikuo's line of sight shifted to the man opposite.

"Ryota Neko's opponent is you?"

The man nodded lightly while stroking his beard.

"That's right...they call you Young Master, so you must be the Young Leader of the Nura Gumi? But even if it is the big boss of the Main House, this is a battle between men, no one can interfere."

"I won't be that dishonorable. Ryota Neko."

Rikuo said...

"Compete with him then."

"Is that okay?"

Ryota Neko thought that he was going to be stopped the whole time.

---I did comment that you are rash once it comes to gambling, it looks like I was right.

He thought that he was going to hear that sentence again and be asked to calm down. But this time, Rikuo told him to continue.

Tsurara let out another screech.

"Rikuo-sama, what is the meaning of this? That old man is really good!"

"Rikuo-sama!" "Young Master!" The members of the Bakeneko Clan also protested.

"Don't give me that nonsense. The customer has already said so, this is a battle between men. Ryota Neko, you don't want to back off either, right?"

"Of course!"

"Then--"

Rikuo used his pipe to point towards the dice dish.

“I will be the witness. Let me witness your spirit.”

This sentence, seemed to establish the setting up of the match.

The scene was filled with cries from the Bakeneko Clan members as well as cheers from the rest of the audience.

Ryota Neko picked up the container and the dice, and faced the front after nodding to Rikuo on his left.

He took one slow deep breath. Seeing the state Ryota Neko’s was in, the onlookers slowly quietened down, and whispers can be heard soon after.

--He’ll definitely lose.

--That’s right.

Don’t worry about the noise...Ryota Neko focused all his concentration on the match.

Talking about large stakes, there will no longer be stakes as large as this.

If he loses, the symbol of the Nura Gumi would be taken away right under the nose of the Young Leader from the Main House. If things really become like this, the consequences will be disastrous.

Should I use that technique—the one to roll out any number. Ryota Neko suddenly had that thought.

But even if he uses that technique, the opponent would still be able to change the numbers using some skill.

Who cares. He shouted within his mind. If all he could hope for is a miracle, then he shall hope.

“Are you ready? Ready...start to roll the dice.”

Ryota Neko inverted the container on top of the straw mat on the dice dish. The dice inside stopped moving.

The man took a deep breath, and said after a pause...

“Even”

It might be because he said that he will bet all his tablets before, the man did not move the tablets.

All the tablets were used to bet on an even number.

Ryota Neko could feel all the gazes in the gambling den focus on him—no, on his hand.

He held his breath, and opened the container.

Both dice had a red dot on them, one and one.

“One and one...even!”

As he announced the results, he looked up at the same time. He lost. Ryota Neko collapsed on the dice dish, and his consciousness started to slip away. Cheers, angry shouts and cries loud enough to shake the whole gambling den could be heard.

--Ryota Neko lost!

--The old man is really something!

--Bakenekoya is really going to be taken? Oh no!

He can't lift his body, or summon any energy. The image of the two red dots on the dice could not be erased from his mind.

"Leader!"

"Leader!"

The members of the Bakenekoya Clan kneeled in front of Ryota Neko and started to cry.

The gambling den was in a state of near chaos. The other staff also ran up from the restaurant and after hearing the situation, they started to cry as well. But Ryota Neko could not tell him not to cry, because the one who wanted to compete in this match with no odds of winning and caused this situation was him.

"Hey boss."

Hearing the man's voice, Ryota Neko lifted his head from the dice dish.

"If you want to cry together, it's fine. But you still have to do what you need to do."

The man stretched out his hand, where his joints can be clearly seen.

"Hand over the deed of Bakenekoya."

Just then, Rikuo spoke...

"The deed cannot be given to you."

Rikuo's lone line caused the noise in the room to stop immediately. Ryota Neko blinked.

"Young Master..."

"Ryota Neko, you don't have to hand the deed over."

In the silence, every single word Rikuo said could be heard clearly. Then he directed a strict glare at the man.

"This man did use cheating tactics, I saw it all."

Rikuo explained.

"Hey hey, young leader, don't spout nonsense."

The man said impatiently.

“Where’s the evidence? Don’t make up excuses because your own men lost, isn’t that being a bad loser?”

“A cheater like you has no right to criticize me. You want proof? Then I’ll show you.”

After saying so, Rikuo waved his pipe. Burning ash flew out from the tobacco end, and fell on the mat in the middle of the dice dish.

One second later...

“Hoooot!!!”

The man shouted suddenly.

Something like smoke emitted from the man’s body. After the fog cleared, what appeared before them was a small Tanuki.

“Ta tat a...tanuki?”

Ryota Neko almost became tongue tied.

The Tanuki sitting on the other side of the dice dish had tears in its eyes, and his hands were holding leather sack like thing, and it kept blowing on it. The extremely stretched sack had a burn mark on it, and the other end was connected to the Tanuki’s underside, which means, the sack like thing was---

“Young Master, that is...that guy’s testicles!”

Ryota Neko shouted while pointing at the skin sac.

“Yes, that is his tactic.”

Rikuo nodded. Just then, Tsurara’s voice was heard...

“That’s gross! How can such a thing appear here!”

A blushing Tsurara turned her back on the dice dish. Kejorou, on the other hand, looked nonchalant, and examined that thing closely...

“Hey, the body is so small, but that place is quite grand.”

After glancing over and seeing Kejorou’s reaction, a smile appeared on Rikuo’s face and said to the Tanuki...

“A skin sac which can change shape and colour at will, that’s so useful—Oi, Tanuki, did you come from Shikoku?”

“Hehe, yes...just like you said.”

The Tanuki gave a sly smile and changed his sac, the size of a seat cushion, back to its original size.

“Young Master, we know the real identity of this guy now, but how did he use his testicles—cough, how did he use that sac to cheat?” Ryota Neko asked.

“You’ll be disappointed once you hear it, the answer is too simple—listen here, this guy can change his sac into any form. He changed his sac into a transparent thin layer, and covered it on top of that tatami there.”

Rikuo used his pipe to point ‘there’ out, which is the small straw mat in the middle of the dice dish.

Ryota Neko tried to imagine how the trick was carried out. The sac was changed into the thinnest transparent layer possible, and extended slowly from the man’s trousers, crawling slowly across the white cloth on the dice dish and covered the mat in the middle. This layer is colourless, and the one rolling the dice would suspect that there will be a layer in between the dice and the mat, even in their dreams.

“—Do you understand now? It means that every single time the container was inverted, the dice will fall onto the guy’s sac. To explain things more clearly, you put the dice on top of the guy’s palm. If the dice was on your own palm, of course he will get any number he wants.

“Ah....”

Ryota Neko sighed. His question had been answered.

No wonder the technique which Ryota Neko was so proud of failed.

Before opening the container, the man adjusted the transparent layer slightly and changed the numbers which Ryota Neko set. It wasn’t luck at all, but an over dominating skill to beat all opponents to increase his winnings.

“You dared to look down on me...!”

Ryota Neko directed a fierce glare at the Tanuki. Even the audience which cheered for the man before changed their stance irresponsibly and shouted at the cheating Tanuki, “Bastard, go die!”

The Tanuki cried out with an “Eh--” and kneeled on the tatami.

“Please help! Let me off! I just wanted to have some fun, and I got carried away...”

“Oi, Tanuki.”

Rikuo leaned forward and asked with an icy tone.

“Are you part of Tamazuki’s youkai? Did you want to take revenge because of your leader’s defeat, so you caused trouble in Nura Gumi’s gambling den?”

“Why would I do that, I wouldn’t dare!”

The Tanuki kneeling on the ground curled up and told his story with a voice that could barely be heard—

This Tamuki did join a group with connections to Tamazuki. And under the summons of the main group, Tanuki bravely left Shikoku for Ukiyoe, but Tamazuki lost in the battle on the highway and returned to Shikoku.

Since the carriage already left, those who are carrying it have no need to stay. Even though he knew this, but this is a rare chance to be in Ukiyoe, his playful side emerged and he decided to take a look at the legendary First Street gambling den.

He passed by Bakenekoya along the way and after having his fill, he played a few rounds in the gambling den upstairs. In the beginning, he used his testicles to obtain a few small wins. At first, he planned to plead for forgiveness and leave after being caught, but he never thought it would be so successful, and couldn't help but become careless and played bigger and bigger stakes—

“After that would be the part about the deed. I never thought I would be able to pull off such a big stake, hehe...”

“You bastard...”

Ryota Neko wanted to jump over the dice dish and give him a punch, but dismissed that immediately. He lowered his raised fist and said unhappily...

“I wanted to punch you to the point where you are unable to stand, but since everything you said is true, then forget it. Why everything became such a big deal, was also my fault, I was too rash.”

He heard Rikuo laugh once with a ‘Heh’

“So you know what’s reason too, that’s good. Isn’t the incident this time a good lesson?”

“Yea...yes...”

Ryota Neko scratched at his head in embarrassment and turned to the Tanuki, saying...

“So that’s the situation, I won’t hold it against you this time. Whether you want to go to Shikoku or somewhere else, you can go now.”

“Tha...thank you boss! The Bakenekoya’s boss has a really big heart, and the food and drinks downstairs are good and cheap! After returning home, I will advertise this place with all my might!”

Even though it’s obvious that he’s just trying to sweet talk, it didn’t sound irritating. After the Tanuki left the room, bowing continuously, Ryota Neko apologized to Rikuo once again, head bowed.

“Young Master, I let you see something shameful. Young Master is still recovering but helped me to catch the cheat, I’m so sorry about that.”

“It’s not that bad. It was a good way to alleviate my boredom.”

“When Young Master told me to play with him, did you already find out his tactic?”

“I was thinking...”

Nurarihyon no Mago Rikuo smeared the burn mark.

“If I was unable to see through his tactic, and he wins this store, it should be a good lesson, right?”

“Young Master—this sort of joke is not funny at all.”

Ryota Neko gave a strained smile.

“Okay, let’s go downstairs and have a drink.”

Rikuo, who wanted to smear the burn mark once again stood up after saying that. Aotabou and the others started to move as well. Just then, the staff ran up from the wine house downstairs.

“Ryota Neko big brother! It’s ba...it’s bad!”

“What are you making so much noise, what happened?”

“The cashier downstairs was counting money and the result was—look at this!”

The staff member was holding a tree leaf.

“Part of the money turned into leaves!”

Ryota Neko took a deep breath, and his face turned red instantly. It must be that Tanuki. Even though he was bowing just now, he must have been smirking slyly inside.

“That stupid Tanuki!”

Ryota Neko ran off after shouting that.

“Hey—don’t be so rash!”

Rikuo’s voice could be heard from behind. Ryota Neko turned around and replied...

“How can I not be rash about this?”

End of 1st story

Story 2: Yakuzen Hall Diary

Chapter 1

“Zen-sama, the Oboro-guruma from the Main House has arrived.” (Translator’s note: Oboro-guruma is a youkai in the form of a carriage)

A clan member said from the other side of the paper door.

“I’ll head there immediately.”

After putting the ancient looking lined book, in which he had been writing down his knowledge on herbs, back into the shelf, Zen left the room and headed towards the foyer.

The mansion had been renovated before, the corridor and the pillars were all new.

This place was totally destroyed by a fire before, but it was rebuilt with help from the Main House.

Zen, wearing a yukata and a haori on the outside, arrived at the yard. The Oboro-guruma, which he applied to the Main House to borrow, a bull cart with a large face, was already waiting.

Just as he was about to enter the carriage, the secretary ran out hurriedly from inside the house.

“Master, where are you going this early in the day? Running around like this is bad for your health!”

The Frog Head youkai wore a fitting dark coloured yukata, and like Zen, wore a haori decorated with a feather emblem. He was the new secretary hired after the house was burnt down. He could execute tasks effectively and was good with numbers, the only weak point of his was that he nags too much.

“I’m going to the mountain. Didn’t I tell you this before?”

Zen turned around and replied roughly.

“Mountain? I did not hear about that at all!”

“Then I’m telling you now. I’m going to the mountain.”

“No, Master’s health is not good, absolutely not! Please come down and rest in bed!”

He’s really naggy. Zen couldn’t help but be reminded of Karasu Tengu every single time he talks to this secretary. That old man is naggy too.

“Basically my body has been bad from the start, it always has been like that.”

“Which is why you have to rest well!”

“I have to go today. Didn’t I tell you before that I have to go to the mountain a few times a year?”

After Zen said this, he just entered the Oboro-guruma without waiting for a reply from the other party.

“Don’t go, Zen-sama!”

“Hey—let’s go.”

Zen told the Oboro-guruma, ignoring the cries from the secretary outside.

From the beginning until now, he has already been ferried by Oboro-guruma to the mountain countless times. Oboro-guruma would know the way without being given explicit instructions. As for the secretary, he is still calling Zen’s name outside.

After feeling the Oboro-guruma float off the ground, Zen closed his eyes.

Chapter 2

Zen would normally appear in a human form, but his real identity is just like his name, a type of bird youkai.

Soaking his feather in wine will produce a poison which can cause death by corroding all of one’s internal organs—Zen is that type of bird youkai whose feathers contain a strong poison. The feather design dyed on the haori is the sign of these poisonous feathers.

When Zen was born, his feathers are very beautiful, and are not poisonous at all. But after they reach adulthood, their feathers will suddenly become poisonous, and even their bodies will be affected by that poison, so their life spans are very short. His father and grandfather all lived very short lives, and do not walk this world anymore.

The herbalist clan which was passed down for generations and led by Zen, and is one of the members of the Nura Gumi. In front of his mansion hangs a sign which says “Yakuzen Hall”, and they heal other youkai for a living. In terms of characteristics, they are obviously not a clan who practices martial arts.

In the human world, people who diagnose illnesses and people who make remedies are different, this method of working is known as the “Medical and medicinal industry”. (Translator’s note: I’m really not sure about this term, sorry) But in Yakuzen Hall, Zen is a doctor, as well as a herbalist.

Regarding the herbs, Zen would try his best to pick the herbs himself. This is one of the reasons why he has to go to the mountain.

He chose to go out in the morning. Besides the fact that breathing in the fresh air would allow him to move around more easily, one of the other reasons is that of the herbs he has to collect, some of them will only be effective after they absorb the morning dew.

While thinking of what type of herbs that he needs to collect later and their recipes, he zoned out.

The Oboro-guruma suddenly stopped and the light impact caused Zen to open his eyes and he got off the carriage.

The place they arrived at is halfway up a mountain deep in the Northwest corner of the Kanto region, a place with some open space. Just then, the eastern part of the sky started to light up. Taking a deep breath, his lungs were filled with a clear mixed scent of trees and soil in the forest. Even with

such a heavily poisoned body—no, it was precisely because his body is like this that he is able to appreciate the true beauty of having such pure air in his lungs.

“Thanks, come pick me up at the usual time.”

Zen said to Oboro-guruma. Walking and collecting herbs nearby would take two hours. Once the time is almost up, Oboro-guruma will come by itself to pick him up.

After watching Oboro-guruma float away in the direction of Ukiyoe Town, Zen walked into the mountains, with a bamboo tube and bag for the herbs over his shoulder.

This mountain, unlike mountains for trekking, does not have roads that have been paved out. One would need to find a gap between the messy growth of trees, push past the tall grass and move forward using one’s instinct. Even though it’s like that, this place is not that foreign to Zen. As long as he does not take too big a risk, he would not stray that far from the scenery he remembers.

Zen forged forward carefully, moving branches and vines aside with one hand.

--Rikuo, don’t run, it’s dangerous.

The image of a young boy running in the woods surfaced in his mind.

Every time Zen comes to this mountain, he will always be reminded to Rikuo. They used to come here frequently to take a walk.

--This mushroom cannot be eaten.

--You’ll get a stomachache from eating this leaf, you know.

During the stroll, Zen will take the chance to teach Rikuo about what he knows. Every time the young Rikuo hears these, he would have a admiring expression on his face, his eyes sparkling.

--Zen knows so much, that’s amazing!

Zen is amazing, youkai are amazing, I want to be a boss when I grow up, and lead all those amazing youkai. Every conversation with Rikuo would always be linked to this topic.

--I’ll be counting on you, Rikuo. You will be the guy who will be the Third in the future.

Zen narrowed his eyes as he looked at the young Rikuo. However, reality betrayed all expectations Zen had of Rikuo.

It was something that happened just after Rikuo entered Middle school. Rikuo said that he didn’t want to be the third successor, he said he was a human and for a human to be the leader of the Nura Gumi is too weird.

The boy who used to run through the forest, innocent, had reached the age where he could wear a uniform, and was struggling, confused about his heritage. From a certain point of view, this was also considered a way of growing up. To expect him to not be confused at all would be too cruel.

But, Zen also felt very disappointed.

Zen's clan had been under the care of the Nura Gumi for generations. The one who constantly protected the bird youkai with a short lifespan, the one who gave them a position as one of the Nura Gumi subordinates, was no one else but the First Head of the Nura Gumi, Nurarihyon. Zen was very thankful for that. If his grandson could become the Third, and he could be by the side of and help the little brother who had been with him since young, he would have no regrets even with his short lifespan. Just as Zen harboured such a grand ambition, Rikuo rejected the proposal to succeed the role, and caused an uproar. At that time, Zen felt his soul turn cold.

The reason why hope burned in Zen again was due to the betrayal within his clan.

Zen grew weaker day by day in heart and body because of his originally weak body and his disappointment in Rikuo. At that time, Zen's attendant Hebichu, used that chance to organise a revolution to make the Yakushi Clan his.

Zen's mansion being totally destroyed by a fire, as mentioned before, was Hebichu's doing. He set the house on fire and attacked the ailing Zen. During that crucial and dangerous moment, Rikuo appeared and saved Zen.

Rikuo rode Oboro-guruma and barged into the burning house. Seeing Nurarihyon's grandson appear so suddenly, Hebichu came up with the notion that he should kill off Rikuo to raise his own status and bared his fangs at Rikuo. However, he was cut into half by Rikuo, who did not hesitate at all, and was burnt to ashes along with his ambitions.

The night form of Rikuo, the awakened Rikuo. This was Zen's first time seeing this form.

Overwhelming power and presence. Rikuo displayed an impressive "Fear". Zen, deeply attracted to this Rikuo, decided from the bottom of his heart to follow this man.

That night, Zen and Rikuo exchanged Sakazuki under the new moon, and became sworn brothers. Before that, the relationship between was just an extension of being childhood playmates, with no guarantee at all, but it was different now. From now on, they will upload the youkai spirit, and become real brothers.

However, it wasn't as if Zen had stopped doubting Rikuo since then, he still had a lot of worries. But now—

After the incident with Gyuuki's clan and the battle with Shikoku, the situation started to change.

Day Rikuo and Night Rikuo started to share the same memories. The milestone of "Becoming the Third" was going to arrive, this desire was now rooted in Rikuo's heart, with no barrier between Day and Night.

He would be able to do it. That guy will become a splendid Third Head of the family—

Now, Zen and the Rikuo now no longer play in the mountain, instead they will frequently have a small drink with one another in the corridors of the Main House, it was a really happy feeling.

The scent of flowers drifted over.

Zen stopped at a small pond at the base of a slope. The banks of the pond are covered in a sea of purplish blue flowers. On both sides of the stream were two large blue purple flowers, just like the two plates at both ends of a scale, and therefore, it was named the Libra flower. The seeds of this flower are good for strengthening the body of weakened youkai, so he picked up a few of those seeds.

Walking forward from the pond, he saw a few branches sticking up out of the water, on the tips are bubbles gathered to the size of a fist, and have a pale cherry colour. These are the eggs of the Red Princess Frog. There are a few branches with the eggs stuck on them. The eggs of the Red Princess Frog can also be made into remedies. Zen plucked off a branch and kept it carefully.

Climbing up the slope and returning to the original path. After walking for a while, the slope suddenly turned steeper, and Zen started to feel breathless. But this was the original route which he planned, and he expected such hardship. After drinking some water from the water tube, Zen continued climbing after some rest.

He reached a forest filled with giant trees not long after. The trunks of the trees in this area are very thick, and the huge shadows casted by the leaves are impressive. Plants which do not like sunlight can be found in this area. For example, the Kurokana, which are pitch black leaves, can be found here. The huge roots which store water provide ideal conditions are turning the rotting leaves into compost. Zen overturned some rocks near the compost, and dug up some small bugs.

As he squatted down to collect some herbs, his sight unintentionally stopped at a bright red entity, which gave him a shock. After walking forward around ten steps, he found a bright red cloth caught around a tree root.

Upon close inspection, he found that it was the type of cloth which humans will spread on the ground when they played outdoors. The humans will sit on it to eat their packed lunches, but found it too troublesome to take back with them, so they left it here.

Zen clicked his tongue, picked up the cloth and folded it. There are no places in the mountain to get rid of the trash, Zen decided to bring it home with him to be gotten rid of. Even though it was not heavy and did not take up much space, Zen still had the feeling of “why did he have to come up to the mountain to pick up rubbish?”

In recent years, the frequency in which he had to take care of the humans’ rubbish had increased. This mountain has become dirtier compared to before. The base of the mountain had been divided into several parts by wide paths, in order to make mountain climbing more convenient for the hikers. Not only that, even those people who lived nearby would throw their bulky items into the mountain.

The human world has started to infringe on the boundaries of the youkai world. That was the situation now.

There is a saying “Mountains are gates to the other side.” Even since ancient times, humans believe that deep in the mountains is where ancient spirits live, the domain of the Gods, and strange things will happen there.

The strange happenings refer to the youkai who live there. If people carelessly step into the youkai's domain, they will hear strange cries all around, and feel an eerie wind blowing before they are possessed by the youkai. The area deep in the mountain is a dangerous place, the ancient people knew that very well.

No staring.

No interfering.

No invading into their territory.

However, when though the rule to not interact with one another has been set, and breaking it is a serious offence, humans who break such a rule without being aware that they have done so still happens occasionally.

The biggest problems lie with "occasionally" and "not being aware". They enter unobstructed, without thinking, and even leave evidence that they have been there. This sort of environment is no longer a demon's world and the youkai habitats shrink even more.

Then, on the same mountain, Zen saw another shocking scene.

That was when he left the forest of giant trees and was descending the mountain.

He heard the sound of machinery from afar. It sounded like the heavy machinery humans use on construction sites.

It should be this way. Zen strayed off his return route and to investigate, following the sound.

After passing through the sparse smattering of trees, Zen couldn't help but say in exclamation...

"What the heck is this..."

Zen could get a good view of his surroundings from where he was standing. Before, he would be able to see the lush greenery growing in the valleys.

But now, the scenery had changed totally. The greenery in the valleys had disappeared and yellow mountain walls could now be seen as the slopes were all dug up. Equipment and heavy machinery were all parked around the area. Zen did not know what the humans were planning to build, but there was one thing he was sure of—

No more strange cries would be heard, and no eerie winds would blow through these valleys. Youkai will no longer be able to survive here.

"Scary humans..."

Zen watched the valley in the midst of being developed, mumbling to himself.

Chapter 3

"Industrial development?"

Hearing Zen's enquiry, the frog secretary said "Yes" and nodded.

“An industrial processing facility. In other words, it’s a facility which processes industrial waste.”

“Industrial waste? Isn’t that...”

“Yes, it is the waste that factories produce.”

“I had already heard that they were going to build a large scale processing factory there some time before. So the surface of the valley has already been razed flat...”

After saying that, the frog sipped his tea with a resigned expression on his face.

Zen was currently in his room, telling his secretary what he saw this morning. The secretary was drinking tea, Zen, on the other hand, was drinking wine from the wine bowl.

“Simply put, it’s just a giant rubbish bin. But they did not have to choose that mountain. That place is a treasure trove of herbs.”

Zen shook his head and sighed. But the frog answered with a know-it-all expression...

“But that processing facility can’t be built in built up areas. That sort of facility will definitely be built deep in the mountains.”

“And you’re too casual about this. With the mountain being destroyed like this, are you really okay with it?”

“Of course I’m not okay with it, but nothing can be done about it.”

“We can give them a stern warning. If we scared them at the construction site, the work should stop right?”

“Use scare tactics on them? I’m doubt that it would succeed.”

“If not, we can put laxatives in their drinking water?”

“That method would be so immature.”

The secretary shook his head, exasperated.

“Master’s ability should not be used on something like this.”

“I know. I won’t do something like that.”

Zen was also aware that what he said was very immature. But seeing the casual attitude of his secretary, he couldn’t resist making some childish suggestions intentionally.

The secretary sipped his tea and continued...

“If we wish to scare away those workers, we would be able to do it ourselves without having to ask the main house for help. But if we do that, the humans will only search for another target, and play the same game, and the youkai habitat will definitely shrink. That might just be the fate of the youkai.”

I know that as well. But I just felt that it's not interesting at all. Zen roughly drank all the wine he had in his bowl in one gulp, the secretary coughed.

"Master, don't you think you're drinking a little too quickly tonight?"

"There's no problem. Besides, there's a lot of wine, enough to sell even."

After the mansion was rebuilt, youkai sent wine over to congratulate them. Looks like there was no need to go to a wine shop any time soon.

"This has nothing to do with whether we need to buy wine or not. Also, please take a look at this before you become drunk."

After saying that, the secretary picked up the piece of paper he put beside him.

"What's this?"

"A flyer informing others about the re-opening of Yakuzen Hall. If Master has no problems after looking through this, I will send it for printing. Actually, this matter should have been settled together with the completion of the house..."

"It was so hectic that time, what could we have done?"

"That's true. What do you think of the contents of the flyer?"

"Hmm, it's not bad. Get it printed then."

"Master, you only took a glance at it!"

Seeing Zen return the flyer so quickly, the frog adjusted his posture and sat up, his back straight.

"Zen-sama."

The frog's tone of voice was stern.

"What..."

"It's good if you worry about the mountain youkai having no place to live, but please focus your attentions on your business. Master is Yakuzen Hall's doctor, herbalist, and at the same time, the director."

"Director?"

Hearing such an unexpected term, Zen spit—of course he didn't throw up blood, but the kind of spit done in laughter, but the secretary did not change his serious expression at all.

"This is not a joke at all. I work at Yakuzen Hall, and received a lot of care from here. I would definitely want Yakuzen Hall to surpass the previous generation, and improve the business."

"Even improving the business huh...if doctor's have nothing to do, that means everyone is healthy, isn't that a good thing?"

“This sort of relaxed attitude with no sense of danger is a taboo. Yakuzen Hall is not supposed to be the rescue team of the Main House—no, what I mean is, that function of Yakuzen Hall is good, but you have to think of how to increase commercial interests.”

“Commercial interests huh...”

“Therefore...”

The secretary shook the flyer a few times.

“We should distribute these fliers, and let the youkai world know about the existence of the Yakuzen Hall. And besides the flyers, I have already printed a commercial in the “Nura Gumi News”. The cell phone website will be open soon as well.”

At this point of time, Zen already found himself unable to keep up with the conversation.

“Website? I don’t understand that at all. Whatever, do anything you like.”

Zen picked up the wine bowl and wine bottle and stood up.

Just then, sounds of someone running could be heard from outside, it stopped in front of Zen’s room.

“Zen-sama, there’s a patient who needs emergency treatment--”

See, what distribution of fliers? Didn’t a patient just end up at our door? But he swallowed those words. The member who came to inform them sounded anxious.

“Okay, I’ll go over immediately.”

Zen directed his answer to the other side of the door.

There was a room in the mansion which is ridiculously big, with a grass mat spread over the wooden floor. Normally, patients will be brought there for a preliminary examination.

Seeing the youkai lying on the grass mat, Zen furrowed his brow.

“It’s so bad...”

Zen couldn’t help saying.

The patient is a youkai with only one eye, probably a member of Hitotsume’s clan. Rather than being concerned about which group he’s from, the patient’s condition is a pressing matter now.

The water content in his body had all been sucked away, like he had been squeezed dry. It seems like he was still conscious. Faint moans could be heard amongst his shallow breathing.

Zen said to the clan member beside him...

“Who bought him here? Seeing his condition, it could not have been you who bought him here.”

“It was me.”

The voice who answered came from behind Zen.

Turning around, he saw a black haired young man in armour walking towards him.

“Kuromaru...”

Karasu Tengu’s son, Kuromaru. Karasu Tengu has three children, collectively known as the ‘Sanba Garasu’. Kuromaru is one of them.

Kuromaru stood beside Zen, and said while watching the one-eyed patient...

“I found him collapsed behind the Ukiyoe Cinema.”

The Sanba Garasu would normally observe and patrol the area they are in charge of from the air. One Eyed was found during one of those patrols.

Zen only said “I see” before he kneeled next to One Eyed. Even though he wanted to ask Kuromaru more questions, but his first task should be treating the patient.

“Hey, do you know I am? I am Zen from Yakuzen Hall.”

“Ohh...Zen-sama...” he replied in a horse voice. It seems like he was more aware of his surroundings than Zen thought.

After nodding to One Eyed, Zen started his treatment.

Very quickly, Zen discovered that One Eyed’s neck, shoulders and both wrists were punctured with numerous tiny holes. He deduced that One Eyed might have been pierced by sharp before having his blood sucked away.

“Can he be treated?”

Kuromaru asked.

“Yes.”

Zen answered without facing him. It would take some time for him to recover, but the injuries were not life threatening.

“Please inform me once you’re done.”

Kuromaru left the room after saying that.

Zen called for his assistants, and asked them to prepare some remedies.

When the treatment was completed, half an hour had already passed.

After One Eyed drank the medicine which was prepared for him, he was moved to another room. After that, Zen told Kuromaru that the patient needed to stay for observation for the time being, but his injuries were not considered life-threatening.

“You said that you found him behind Ukiyoe cinema? Did you see who did it?”

In response to Zen’s question, Kuromaru shook his head.

“No, when I saw One Eyed, he had already collapsed. At that time, he kept mumbling ‘Woman...that woman...’”.

“Woman?”

Kuromaru nodded.

Both of them sat facing each other in a room with a wooden floor. Zen leaned against a pillar crossing his legs, while Kuromaru was in a kneeling position with his back straight. It would seem that their personality is clear just by observing how they sit.

“Is it a female youkai?”

Facing Zen who asked the question, Kuromaru tilted his head and said...

“I didn’t ask that much. At that time, I just wanted to send him here as quickly as possible.”

“That makes sense.”

Let’s just ask him after he wakes up, Zen thought.

“When I was sending him over, I saw that he had a lot of little holes on his neck and wrists.”

“Yeah, he might have been punctured by something, and got all his blood sucked away. It must have been done by a vampire youkai.”

“Vampi...”

Kuromaru suddenly had a very heavy expression on his face.

“Is it youkai from the other territories again? Like the ones from Shikoku...”

“Who knows? We can’t be sure about that right now. He kept mentioning a woman, maybe he got into a fight with his girlfriend, yeah?”

Hearing Zen’s light hearted joke, Kuromaru did not laugh at all. He stood up and said with the same serious expression on his face...

“I will inform Tosakamaru and Sasami to increase the defences.”

Tosakamaru and Sasami are the names of the other two members of the Sanba Garasu.

“Please be careful when you go out as well, Zen-sama.”

“Yeah, I will. Even though I don’t dislike fighting, but it’s not one of my specialities after all.”

“If there are any updates, I will inform Zen-sama.”

“Okay, if I obtain any new information from One Eyed, I will inform the Main house as well.”

Kuromaru bowed, and turned to leave. When he left the room, he turned around again to give a nod. His personality can be seen by the way he takes his leave.

Chapter 4

"You don't have to get up, just continue resting."

Zen stopped One Eyed, who was trying to sit up.

One Eyed said "Please excuse me" before he lay down again.

"How do you feel?"

Zen asked as he sat down next to where One Eyed was resting.

The room was very clean, and the tatamis having a lingering fresh scent. After One Eyed, who was nearly sucked dry, received treatment in the room with the wood lined floor, he was moved to this room. Three days have passed since he was moved here.

"Thanks to Zen-sama, I am a lot better."

One Eyed, who answered, looked a lot healthier compared to the first day he was brought here. The many small puncture wounds have started to heal slowly. His cheeks still have quite a number of scars, and those would need to take a longer time for a full recovery.

"Eat more foods that will replenish your blood content. I have already asked those youkai in charge of food preparation to make foods that can replenish your blood content. For the medicine, there are two types. One would be able to simulate the creation of red blood cells, the other will replenish your youki."

Besides having his blood sucked away, a large amount of One Eyed's youkai had been removed as well.

"I'm really sorry for causing so much trouble to Zen-sama. I am a youkai from the Hitotsume clan."

"Yeah, I have already confirmed it when you were sleeping."

Yesterday, Zen called a member from the Hitotsume clan over to confirm the identity of the One Eyed who was resting. That's right, he is one of us. That was what the member said.

"We're a family, so just have a good rest here until you recover, there's no need to feel shy about it."

"Thank you so much, Zen-sama!"

"Also, One Eyed, the questions asked now is the main point today..."

Zen leaned closer to the bed and asked...

"I ask you, who did this?"

He only came here today to ask this question.

One Eyed furrowed his brow, seeming to recall the fear he felt as he was attacked.

"I heard that you kept mumbling the word 'Woman' as you were brought here."

“Woman...”

One Eyed blinked his huge eye before continuing...

“I was drinking at Bakeneko Street that night. After drinking my fill, I left the street and decided to take a stroll to clear my head, so I walked to the area behind the cinema, and I saw a woman squatting at the end of the street...”

According to One Eyed, the woman had good looking features and was wearing a school uniform. Zen started to conjure a vague image of the clothes Yuki-onna Tsurara wore when she went to school, and said...

“Okay...but it shouldn’t be a woman, more like a young girl. You said she was squatting on the ground, so you went over and what did you say to her?”

“Yes...she had a hand against her stomach, and looked really uncomfortable, so I thought she had fallen sick.”

“Seriously, even though the other person was a youkai—if it was a normal human, and she was suddenly called by a big eye like you, it wouldn’t be strange if she was scared stiff by you.”

“Oh no, Zen-sama, I can change my outward appearance.”

Which means, One Eyed changed into another face with two eyes, and transformed into a human appearance before he talked to the girl.

“I asked her if she didn’t felt uncomfortable anywhere, then—”

“Then?”

“Then she put her hand on my shoulder...”

Having reached this part of his tale, One Eyed shut his eye tightly. Shaking his head rigorously, he continued with fear in his voice...

“I can’t remember what happened next. When I woke up, I was already lying on the ground, and in the state that you saw I was in...”

Just as One Eyed was mumbling “Woman...that woman...” Kuromaru discovered him and he was sent to Yakuzen Hall.

Zen crossed his arms, and let out a sigh.

“Hmm...are you sure you don’t remember anything? As long as we know what type of youkai she is, it could be a big clue. Can’t you recall even a little?”

Zen’s intuition told him that the other party reverted back into her original youkai form before attacking One Eyed, and her usual form was not that of a girl.

But—

“I’m sorry...”

One Eyed apologized.

"I really can't remember anymore..."

"Fine, it's okay."

Zen nodded as he said that.

It was not unusual for a youkai to lose consciousness when facing a strong youki. If it was a youkai, they would only lose their memories in the worse case. If it was a human, they would lose their life in an instant. It can be seen that the other party was a youkai with very strong youki.

"I'm sorry for asking so many questions. Please rest well."

Zen said to One Eyed, and stood.

After returning to his bedroom, Zen started to think...

The information One Eyed provided is not enough. Speaking to a youkai disguised as a girl, losing consciousness when touched and having their blood sucked out.

There might be past records of such a youkai and related phenomenon. Zen checked all the records in his room, but could not find any useful information. He looked through the records in the clinic storeroom, with the same results.

It could be a new youkai. Or a foreign youkai which crossed the seas.

It is said that there are over a thousand species of youkai. And the types of youkai within these one thousand species are not fixed as well. There are youkai who were forced to leave their original habitats, and slowly disappear..., there are also youkai who can only be born within the environment of modern society, a totally new species of youkai.

Answers may not be found within existing knowledge and literature. The conclusion might sound grand, but that was the feeling that he had.

However, that night, new victims appeared.

An Oni (Japanese demon) who was virtually sucked dry was carried to Yakuzen Hall.

The two youkai who brought the patient in were the patient's companions.

These Oni do not belong to any group, and did not join the Nura Gumi, but they do not harbour any bad intentions towards anyone. Amongst the youkai, there were also youkai who wander around without any affiliations to any group.

The Oni's condition was exactly the same as One Eyed. His head, neck and shoulders were covered in tiny holes. His blood was sucked dry and his consciousness was fuzzy.

The place where he was attacked was the same as the last one, in an alley near the Bakeneko Street. They were also on the way home after a drink.

The Oni who was attacked was using the toilet at the end of the alley at that time.

--I'm going to take a leak.

--Okay, I'll wait here for you.

After a while, the two Oni who were waiting at the mouth of the alley heard a scream.

When they ran over to take a look, their companion who was lively just a moment ago, had collapsed in front of the public toilet, dried up, moaning. When they leaned closer to hear what he was saying, they heard, with constant pauses, that he had become like this after he talked to a girl who was squatting in front of the toilet.

"Why is it the same?"

In the treatment room with a wooden floor, Zen wrinkled his forehead.

Because he had already did this once, the treatment processed can be considered more smooth sailing this time. After he let the patient drink the same medicine as One Eyed, he left the remaining matters to his assistant.

"Master, I think it would be better if we report this incident to the Main House as well?"

The Frog Secretary proposed to Zen near the end of the treatment process.

Zen nodded, he was thinking about that as well.

Zen ordered one of the members to inform the Main House that another victim had appeared.

After giving the order, Zen still looked preoccupied. At that moment, the Frog Secretary suddenly came closer, coughing once...

"Master, please do not think of unnecessary things."

Zen was shocked when he heard that. This housekeeper could not be underestimated.

"Wha...what unnecessary things? I don't know what you're talking about."

The secretary continued to speak with a cautionary tone in his voice...

"Master should only concentrate on the treatment. The issue of finding the youkai who sucked out the blood should be a job for the Sanba Garasu from the Main House, do you understand?"

"Fine, I know that."

Zen answered. But the secretary, who kept looking over, had an expression that translated to "Really?"

"What's wrong, you're making me feel uncomfortable."

Zen shot back, and hurriedly avoided the look directed at him.

Chapter 5

Even though the standards are different, all doctors possess some sort of research spirit.

What kind of illnesses are more common now, which medicines are particularly effective...etc, they were always greedy for the newest information. Of course, Zen possesses this as well.

I really want to find out the true identity of the vampire and expose him. The research spirit inside Zen started to awaken.

The secretary who gave constant reminders was skilled as well. He could tell that Zen wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery even if he had to push the limits of his body.

The secretary's feelings can be understood. If something happened to Zen, it will affect the survival of the group.

Because Zen's body is weak, he is not good at combat. When Kuromaru said to be careful while going out, it was because of this as well.

--But, I really want to get to the bottom of this.

Three days passed since Oni was sent over.

Zen's curiosity did not wane at all. Instead, his desire to go out and investigate grew larger and larger. He wanted to go to the area around the crime scene to look for clues, or get some information by asking around in Bakeneko Street.

Meaning he wanted to do some ground work. There is some knowledge that cannot be obtained by cooping up in the room and studying. When doctors lose the drive to learn more, they do not deserve to be a doctor. Also, there was a youkai causing trouble in Nura territory and he was not doing anything about it. That's not interesting at all.

Even though he was thankful for his secretary's and Kuromaru's concern, but he did not plan to involve himself too deeply in the matter. He would leave the scene once he feels danger.

On the third day since One Eyed was sent here, Oni was sent over. It might not be the case where an incident will occur every three days, but tonight would be the third night since Oni was sent here, it was almost time to go out and investigate.

However, the Frog secretary had been keeping a close eye on him, and sneaking out wasn't that easy. The secretary was always in the room next to foyer, keeping accounts, with no sign of leaving his room.

Zen pretended to read in his bedroom, and walked towards to foyer when he felt the time was right, only to see that the secretary was still there.

"Where are you going?"

A probing voice sounded from inside the room, shocking Zen.

"Hm, nothing. I just took the wrong path when returning to my room."

“Really? The new house does that new partitions, and it’s quite easy to make a mistake, that makes sense, yes.”

That irritating guy. Zen returned to his room to calm down, and realized that he could sneak out from the back door behind the eating area, and crept to the back door behind the eating area.

“Where are you going?”

The secretary, using an unexplainable sixth sense, was standing there, both arms crossed.

Then how about I squeeze out from the small window in the toilet? But—

“Where are you going?”

There was already someone under the window.

If it’s like this, then I have no choice but to jump down from the second floor window. It might be a bit high, but it’s still manageable. Just as Zen was about to put one foot on the window sill—

“Where are you going?”

The secretary was in the garden looking up at the second floor.

“Have you had enough!”

When they faced each other in the bedroom, all the Zen’s anger was released.

“You’re always waiting there wherever I go, can you spilt yourself into five or something?”

“Five duplicates might not be enough.”

He actually said something unexpectedly scary.

“Don’t frighten me like that...”

“Do you really want to go out that much?”

“Yes, I want to go out.”

“No.”

“I only want to walk around the crime scene, I’ll return when I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“It’ll be too late if something happened. It’s not like going up the mountain to pick herbs.”

“You worry too much. Besides, if I was really attacked...”

“No is no. There is no need for Master to do anything personally. There are still many things around Yakuzen Hall that you can do, please know your priorities.”

“You’re really...”

As Zen spoke, he took a piece of paper from the traditional Japanese table nearby. It was the flier which the secretary passed to Zen before, announcing the re-opening of the clinic. It had been printed and distributed to various areas.

"I know that printing these and advertising is important, but a strange youkai has appeared—to me, to Yakuzen Hall, investigating this personally is important as well! And the area where the person is causing trouble is part of Nura territory, how can I just leave it alone!"

"I can understand your feelings. But I will not alter my opinion. Master is definitely not allowed to go out."

As an old saying goes 'A frog would not mind at all even if water would be thrown at its face.' Is a really fitting statement. Seeing the smooth frog face, Zen became more and more worked up. (Translator's note: A Japanese idiom, meaning 'does not mind at all')

"Why don't you understand what I mean! I'm saying..."

Just as his voice raised in pitch and volume, a lot of blood suddenly spurted out from Zen's mouth. This happens when Zen is worked up, and is a common occurrence. The secretary, who received the full blow up front, had his head covered in blood.

"Cough, cough! I...I can't see the front! Mas...master!"

The secretary fell backward on the floor, his arms waving wildly.

--Ah, now's the chance...

Zen smiled. He opened the paper door lightly, and set foot on the corridor"

"Master! Master! Hey—someone come over this instant!"

Chapter 6

A layer of clouds blocked the moon that night.

Zen, who sneaked out of the mansion, was currently walking around Ukiyoe First Street. The First Street, with glowing neon lights overlapping with the darkness of the alleys, showed another side of the area of night life.

First, I'll go to Bakeneko Street to gather information. Zen started to move, but decided to go there at a later time after thinking about it for a while.

There were a lot of familiar faces in the store, and it will be easy to obtain information, but if he was caught in a situation where he cannot refuse a drink, he'll definitely end up throwing everything out of the window and start drinking, and be unable to accomplish what he came for. Zen wanted to avoid that kind of situation.

Therefore he decided to take a look around the crime scene before going to Bakenekoya.

The place where One Eyed got attacked was behind the Ukiyoe Cinema. Zen went to that place.

Zen intentionally chose a dark road where there was nobody else around. The area behind the cinema was not that far from the public toilet where Oni was attacked, so he went to the public toilet next.

The atmosphere around the public toilet was very strange. Even as a youkai, Zen was still affected by it. After patrolling around the area once, he returned to the alley to investigate.

He wasn't looking for an object, but a strange air or a flow of youki, things like that. When youkai or spiritual related happenings occur, there will always be a shift in atmosphere just before it happens, but nothing like that could be felt yet.

If the pattern where an incident will occur every three days is followed, it would most likely appear tonight.

It should occur around this time as well.

Zen suddenly thought that the other party might just change its target location.

Two youkai have already had their blood sucked out around Ukiyoe First Street. The enemy might have become more wary about this area.

It would be good if he had a means of transportation like the Oboro-guruma, but tonight, Zen can only use his own two feet to move around. Even though he won't be able to go that far, he should try going to Maeda way to take a look. Just as Zen made up his mind, and walked into the alley next to a high rise building—

On the other end of the path, just out of reach of the light emitted by the street light, a black shadow was squatting there.

After taking a closer look, it was a silhouette of a young girl. She was wearing a school uniform, a hand pressed against her stomach.

"Oi oi..."

--I can't believe it, I've really met it?

Zen stopped walking and sighed.

I might as well do something about it myself, Zen thought to himself. It was too inefficient just to look for clues. It would be a lot quicker if he was attacked, because he would get a lot more information that way. Rash thoughts like that flew through his mind.

But he was hesitant about having to do it for real. Is it really okay just to approach like that? One Eyed and Oni's whole bodies were punctured, and their blood was sucked dry—he could end up like that if he wasn't careful, and if no one found him, there was really a high chance of dying.

However, no matter how hesitant he felt, it still lost to his curiosity. Didn't he end up here because he wanted to find out the truth?

Zen walked toward the girl. The pained moans could be heard more clearly now.

“My stomach...my stomach really hurts.”

The young girl looked up at Zen, who was standing next to her, and said so in a soft voice.

No wonder they got tricked, Zen thought to himself. The young girl had very attractive looks and soft hair flowed past her shoulders. If anyone had any lecherous thoughts, they would definitely fall into her trap immediately.

“Big brother, help me...”

--Big brother, such a dangerous younger sister...

Zen kneeled next to the girl on one knee and asked.

“Young lady, are you okay?”

“My stomach really hurts...”

“Your stomach hurts huh. Did you eat too much? Or is it because...you drank too much blood?”

After Zen whispered that, the girl’s expression froze. Both her eyes suddenly glowed and the youki she kept suppressed burst out in one wave. Zen’s hair and clothes were blown back, like they were subjected to strong wind.

Looking at this and considering the youki possessed by One Eyed and Oni, it was no wonder that they passed out.

The girl still maintained her form of a girl, but—

“Give me...your blood...I want blood...blood...”

The girl changed her form while mumbling that. Her snow white skin quickly lost their moisture and gradually turned brown. Her fingers were changing in the same way. Her fingers were also extending, as if new joints were being added to them, just like the growth of a tree branch. Her soft hair bunched up and was extending as well.

--A plant youkai?

Zen calmly thought about the original form of the other party.

The uniform she was wearing was something she could produce as well. At that time, the girl had already turned into a tree, a moving tree youkai.

Sharp branches and vines swiftly stabbed into Zen’s neck and arms. There was no time to avoid them at all. The sudden pain caused Zen to let out a cry.

“Is it time to feed already...”

His voice turned hoarse. His body gradually grew colder.

“Give me...blood...I want blood...”

The other party said with a dry scratchy voice.

The coldness he felt grew stronger. His blood was being taken away drop by drop, and he could feel his consciousness fading.

--Damn...I need to take action now...

It's time to attack.

Zen closed his eyes, and let out his youki. Feathers immediately flew out of Zen's body and spread apart.

He was waiting for a change in the opponent.

The tree youkai used the branches and vines like a straw and continued to suck out Zen's blood.

Several seconds later, the face of the other party changed. The branches and vines that were moving around on the surface as they sucked blood suddenly stopped moving.

The next moment—

“Ahh, wooh!”

The youkai let out a sound that sounded like a cough or crying, and threw Zen away. Even though he was thrown on the ground, Zen continued to observe the state of the other party.

The tree youkai rolled on the ground in pain. The long branches and vines became shorter and shorter.

Thank god it was effective, Zen let out a sigh of relief. The places where he was punctured still hurt, Zen furrowed his brow, stood up, and said to the youkai who was still crouched on the ground...

“How did my potent toxin taste?”

“Toxin...?”

After letting out a cry, the youkai started a coughing fit.

When Zen attacked, he released his youki and released poison into his bloodstream. He had already planned earlier that he would counterattack in such a way if he was attacked by the blood sucking youkai.

Short cries could be heard amongst the coughing.

“There's poison...cough cough...death...I would die...”

“You don't have to worry about that. I have already controlled the poison to a non-lethal level. I am Zen, poison is my speciality.”

“Zen...Zen! No wonder feathers flew out...urgh!”

Without finishing her sentence, the tree youkai started to throw up.

By the time the poison was totally vomited out, and they could talk again, thirty minutes had already passed.

Zen and the tree youkai, who had turned back into a girl, sat on the side of the street. He first asked the youkai's name.

"My name is Blood Tree."

"Blood Tree..."

Zen said to himself, and thought that her name should be written as 血血木. A blood sucking tree, it was highly likely that this was the meaning.

"I've never heard of this name in Ukiyoe...where do you come from?"

Hearing Zen's question, Blood Tree shook her head.

"I did not join any group. To tell the truth, I shouldn't even be on these streets."

Referring to herself as 'Ore', it really doesn't match her appearance of a girl. (Translator's note: The whole time, Blood Tree uses 'Ore' when referring to herself, which is normally used by guys.)

"I was originally a mountain youkai."

Blood Tree said.

"The mountain?"

"Yes."

Blood Tree nodded, and said the name of a certain mountain. That was the place Zen went to pick herbs.

"It's that mountain? Then why did you come here?"

"Because I can't stay there anymore."

"Why?"

"Because of the construction."

"Construction?"

As he asked the question, a scene suddenly appeared in his mind.

Dug up valleys. Bare mountain range. Machinery which produce unpleasant sounds. Industrial processing facility—

"I see. You were originally that mountain's..."

As Zen was speaking, the youkai with an appearance of a young girl nodded at him, a lonely expression on her face.

“I originally did not even need to move at all. I didn’t even need to change shape. Maintaining my shape as a tree on the mountain, all I needed to survive was to suck some blood from a passing human or youkai. But one day, some humans came to do construction work--”

Her habitat was stolen. The demon world was no longer a demon world, and she had no choice but to leave.

The mountain is huge, maybe they could find another forest to live in. But it was not that simple in reality. Plants can be relocated, but it was different for plant youkai. There are some youkai that can only survive in “The place they were born”. Blood Tree was one of those youkai. Since the moment Blood Tree was chased away from that location, the mountain, she was destined to a life of wandering.

In order to survive, Blood Tree has no choice but to suck blood. If she wanted fresh blood, she would need to go to a place with a lot of humans or youkai, so she can only leave the mountain and come to Ukiyoe.

Taking an appearance of a young girl, pretending to have a stomachache, and attacking those who approached her—she only used it as a desperate measure, but it worked better than she expected.

However, there was one issue that prevented Blood Tree from being satisfied.

“I am not used to changing my form, and maintaining this form uses up a lot of my youki. In order to replenish my youki, I need to suck more blood, so...”

“So even though you only need to suck blood occasionally on the mountain, but in order to maintain this form on the streets, you’ll need to increase the frequency of sucking blood and quantity of blood you suck...”

Blood Tree nodded tiredly. From the side profile of the girl’s face, she looked really pitiful.

“I’m not happy with what happened at that mountain as well. That place is also important to me.”

“To Zen-sama as well?”

“Yeah,” Zen nodded.

The area deep in the mountains will soon belong to humans. Youkai will get chased away, and it will be harder to make medicine. The secretary said, this is destiny.

A desire to fight against fate, but with methods to do so. Blood Tree was the same as well.

The Blood Tree who came to Ukiyoe was pitiful, but there was no way they could let her continue attacking people to suck blood.

Zen took out a piece of paper. It was the flier for Yakuzen Hall. Zen did not bring it intentionally, he just naturally kept it in his robes. He passed the flier to Blood Tree.

“Yakezen Hall...”

Blood Tree said to herself.

“This is my home. It was burnt down once, but was rebuilt recently. Come if you want.”

Blood Tree looked confused.

Zen continued.

“Didn’t you say that you were forced to leave your original habitat, and needed to suck a lot of blood? However, Ukiyoe is Nura Gumi’s territory, so you’re not allowed to suck blood here.”

“Then what should I do...”

“When you feel like sucking blood to replenish your youki, rush over to find me before you attack anyone. I will make some medicine so you can replenish your youki without having to suck blood.”

Zen blinked a bit as he explained. Blood Tree cheered up quickly, hugging the flier close to her, and lowered her head.

“Thank you Zen-sama! I wanted to attack you just now, but you’re so nice to me...”

“There’s no need to be so formal. I’m happy that I’m able to pass the flier to you as well. I can’t help it if I have a guy at home who keeps pestering me to distribute fliers.”

When he returned home, that guy who kept pestering him to distribute fliers was so angry that he started to emit smoke.

Zen smiled and said that even though he did meet the blood sucking youkai, and they got into a big fight, but not only did it not die in the end, the blood sucking youkai even became a customer, and will visit next time to obtain medicine. However, the secretary only got angrier after hearing that.

“Master! Now is not the time for laughs, why didn’t you listen to my advi...”

He’s really too noisy. It looks like he was going to lecture for a long time, so Zen covered his ears and escaped to the corridor, just to bump into one of the members who came to inform him that a visitor had arrived.

“Master, Rikuo-sama from the Main House has arrived.”

After hearing that it was Rikuo, Zen couldn’t help but smile widely. The Young Head from the Main House is here. To escape the long lecture from the Frog secretary, there was no better reason than this.

After asking the member to prepare wine and some dishes, Zen went to the foyer to greet Rikuo.

“Yo Zen, I brought wine to celebrate the completion of your new house.”

Night Rikuo was sitting on the horizontal beam of the foyer, a wine bottle in hand.

Zen smiled more deeply. A drink after work does have a good feeling, and with Rikuo keeping him company, the wine would taste a lot sweeter.

“Come in then.”

Zen invited his sworn brother into the house.

That night, Rikuo brought along two gifts.

One gift was the one mentioned just now, wine to celebrate the completion of the new house. The other gift was a tale of what happened on the way here—

The subject where he met Oitekebori. (Translator’s note: Oitekebori is that youkai that steals things and will only return the item if it was offered a better one. In short, it’s that youkai that is happily using Nurarihyon’s smoking pipe right now.)

Story 3: Sanba Garasu and the Thousand Nights

Chapter 1

Aware that Rikuo would take a stroll every night these days, Kuromaru felt that he would probably bump into Rikuo occasionally when he's patrolling.

It should be tonight then. Kuromaru saw Tsuchinoko, floating in midair with Rikuo on its back. He immediately called out, "Young Master", respectfully.

Rikuo glanced sideways at Kuromaru, who had flew to his side.

"Yo, Kuromaru. How is Ukiyoe tonight?"

"Currently, there are no major infractions."

"I see. Your haori didn't get taken, did it?"

Rikuo smiled slightly.

"No, I'm fine."

Kuromaru answered without any change in his expression. "Young Master's Nenekirimaru didn't get taken, did it?" he wouldn't say something like that as well. He does not like cracking jokes with other people.

Just to elaborate, the joke about the haori originated from a youkai that Rikuo and Kuromaru both meet one after another one night a few days back -- Oitekebori.

Oitekebori is a youkai with the appearance of an old woman. She lives in a pond, and will snatch important items away from those who pass by.

The sword Rikuo uses to protect himself, Nenekirimaru, was taken by Oitekebori once. Kuromaru, on the other hand, lost his haori, the one with the "Fear" symbol printed on it.

"I wonder if that guy is still using that smoking pipe..."

Rikuo said to himself.

The smoking pipe refers to the one used by the Supreme Commander. It was *the last item Rikuo given to Oitekebori*.

Kuromaru exchanged his haori for Nenekirimaru, then Rikuo exchanged his grandfather's smoking pipe for Kuromaru's haori. This series of item exchanges happened that night.

Oitekebori will not let it go if she was not given anything, something must be given to her.

In this world, there are youkai which are bounded by certain rules.

When you leave, you must leave something behind, Oitekebori is *the personification of that rule*. The rules are the basis of existence of such youkai, it is also a type of ability.

“Maybe it was already exchanged for something else.”

Kuromaru commented.

“Do you want to check?”

“There’s no need to go through that much trouble.”

Rikuo gave a small laugh and shook his head.

“You’re really serious.”

“If you want to investigate, then feel free to inform me, then I’ll take my leave.”

To Rikuo, Kuromaru’s reply was yet another demonstration of being too serious, Rikuo’s smile grew wider.

He has been told frequently by other youkai that he was too serious, but he was never too bothered by this personality of his...or rather, how can he not be serious when he was tasked with patrolling the territory? That was what Kuromaru’s mindset is like.

Kuromaru felt that he was acting at Nura Gumi’s antenna. His job was to pick out any warning signs of strange events that might occur, or signs of danger. If the antenna is not sensitive enough, these signs would be missed, and external enemies might invade without them being aware about it. So the antenna must be active at all times, while maintaining that high sensitivity. Therefore, in his opinion, he felt that his serious personality suited this job very well.

His internal antenna suddenly detected something. Kuromaru stopped flying forward.

He noticed that the wall of the commercial building below him had some strange symbols. Rikuo, following Kuromaru’s line of sight, also saw those strange symbols.

“What’s that?”

Kuromaru lowered his altitude as he said that. Rikuo, riding on the large snake, also moved closer.

Even though it’s the outer wall, but it was quite high up, on the top floor of a building more than ten stories high.

The words were made up of various colours of paint, with a rather unique font.

“Street graffiti, huh...”

Kuromaru said in a low voice. He knows that the strange drawings that he sees on the streets are called street graffiti. He might have heard it from Tosakamaru when they were chatting.

Unsure if he had heard of the term street graffiti, maybe he doesn’t know at all, Rikuo simply expressed his thoughts in a rather blunt manner...

“What symbols are these, I can’t understand them.”

Kuromaru continued staring at the words. After examining it for a while, he started to see a pattern, and thought it might be that word.

“Isn’t it...the word ‘Thousand’?”

“Thousand?”

“Yes.”

The drawing was very special, but basically it looked like the kanji representation of the number “Thousand”

The second stroke of the word “Thousand” is a horizontal line, like arms that are wide open, like an arched door. Above the horizontal line on both sides there are two groups of numbers, “10” and “00”. The design seemed to have incorporated the kanji of “Thousand” and the Arabic representation “1000”. On the lower right corner, there was a small “A-1”, these different sections can be identified easily.

(Translator’s note: The kanji for Thousand is 千, the symbol will be described a few times in this story, so please keep in mind what it looks like.)

Kuromaru also explained to Rikuo the structure of the drawing.

“Oh --”

Rikuo did not react much at all.

“It’s not that easy to draw this at such a high place.”

“True.”

Kuromaru nodded. Street graffiti was a common sight, but having it drawn at such a high place would be very eye-catching. It would not be easy to reach over the rooftop to draw this, unless the platform used to clean windows was used—but this was under the assumption that the one who did this was human. If it was a being who could fly, doing this would be easy.

Rikuo looked over.

“Don’t tell me you were the one who did this?”

“I’ll get angry if you say stuff like that, Young Master.”

Kuromaru was not in the mood to care about Rikuo’s joking comments, and stared at the picture, thinking. Who did this and what method did he use to write these words? And for what purpose?

An uneasy feeling continued to bother the antenna.

Late night, a youth, about 16 or 17 years old, ran along the alleys of Ukiyoe, panting heavily.

His attire is hip-hop style. A large cotton top, with trousers that are loose around the waist.

The youth was currently being chased. The other party was made up of 30 people, also a group of youths, with similar attire to the youth being chased.

The escaping youth slowly came closer to the remains of a pharmaceutical factory. The locals called this place a “Ghost Town”, there was even an abandoned school, which had always been famous of its strange atmosphere, even Ukiyoe knew to stay away from it.

The youth quickly scanned both sides of the road, looking for a place to hide. He wants to call for people in his group for help, but it was hard to use the handphone while running continuously. The best course of action is to find a place to hide, and call his buddies for help from there, that should be enough to escape this crisis.

His legs and lungs have reached his limit, he could run no further.

It was a dead end ahead, he had no choice but to turn right. Very quickly, he found a back door to a high rise building. What looked like a pharmaceutical company had already been abandoned for a long time, there was even a big hole in the bottom half of the glass door, the youth quickly went through the hole.

The people who were chasing after him should not have seen him taking refuge in the building. The youth adjusted his footfalls so he wouldn't make a sound, and made his way to the top floor.

Of course, the internal lighting in the building could not be used anymore. The youth opened up his foldable phone, and used the light emitted from the phone as illumination as he climbed up the stairs.

The fourth floor is already the top floor. The door which had roof top access had a huge padlock on it.

The youth entered one of the fourth floor rooms, which might have been an office once, and sat down against one of the walls. As he sat down, his foot seemed to step on something, and it produced a dry crackling sound, but there was nothing under his feet.

The youth steadied his breathing and took out his handphone. He did not have any time to ponder about whom to send his message to. After writing a message to ask for help, he selected the mail addresses of some of his buddies and sent the message using the multiple recipients option.

After folding his handphone shut, he took another deep breath.

What are those guys planning to do? That thought surfaced in the youth's mind once more. He was referring to those people who were chasing after him—

About 30 minutes ago, as he walked out of the game arcade by himself, some people suddenly rushed out, surrounded him, and forcefully pulled him into the nearby alley.

“Which gang are you from!?”

The moment he shouted at them, the other guy, a bald person who looked of rather high rank, suddenly rushed at him. The youth got hit with a headbutt.

"It's none of your business which gang we're from. Hey, get him!"

In the darkness, the guy smiled.

The fear he felt was even more intense than the pain he felt. From the situation, I would not be able to leave unscathed, the youth thought to himself.

As he entertained thoughts of escape, his body started moving by itself. The youth leapt up from his crouching position and escaped. As he ran, the number of enemies increased without warning, they now number around 30 people.

Where did all of people come from...?

He had never seen those people before. Is it a newly formed group? But he did not remember hearing anything about a new group appearing in Ukiyoe.

The group of people of unknown origin let of cries of joy as they chased down the youth, causing others to worry about the upcoming predicament faced by the youth.

After sending the message, the fear that he felt started to dissipate. His buddies would arrive very soon. If those people who received the message bought more people along, there would be about 30 people.

30 people. In terms of manpower, they will be evenly matched. The youth's mind was filled with thoughts of escaping while being protected by his buddies, but in reality, everything depends on the current situation, or else they might end up being attacked instead.

--Please hurry...

Just as he shouted in his mind, he saw something being reflected on the window on his left side.

The youth came very close to fainting.

Reflected in the window was the face of the bald guy just now. He was smiling through the glass, and looking straight at the youth.

Besides the fear he felt, he was also filled with confusion.

--How can this be? Isn't this the fourth floor?

Did they erect a ladder and climb up here? But he did not hear anything hitting the wall at all. In addition, there was no real benefit in using a ladder to climb up here.

The bald guy could move his hands freely even though he was outside the window of the fourth floor. It was really bizarre. He could stand there even though he wasn't holding anything with his hands, how did he manage to do that? Was there a place to stand? Or is he suspended in mid-air by wires that cannot be seen? He might be able to get his answer if he went closer to the window, but his current task is—

--I have to leave quickly...

The youth thought. But fear rose up in him again, and his knees felt weak.

The next instant, the bald guy broke the window and flew in, and rolled on the floor accompanied by a large crash of glass. He kneeled on one knee and licked his lips after seeing the youth.

“Found you.”

The bad guy stood up slowly. His sports jacket, with a different coloured top and bottom half, wrapped around his body without any excess lumps, and seems to be quite firm. He gave a dangerous smile, and said to the youth...

“Hey, thanks for escaping to the fourth floor.”

“...?”

He couldn’t understand it at all. What is there to thank about escaping to the fourth floor...?

“Now then, you’re really going to get it, are you prepared? Woooo--!

The bald guy suddenly let out a strange sound that sounded like a long howl.

Is this guy on drugs? Within all that fear, the youth suspected this.

After a while, answers of “Wooo--”, “Wooo--” could be heard outside the window.

The bald guy threw the steel pipe he was holding on the ground, making a clang sound, signaling the end of the mobbing.

The youth had lost consciousness because of the fear he felt and the pain. He might have broke one of two ribs as well.

In the beginning, only a few people were beating the youth up, *as the other members came*, they also started to bash up the youth.

After the mobbing, the group of people surrounding the youth naturally dispersed.

The bald guy called out to one of the other members with an “Oi”, and pointed to the largest wall in the room.

After the member, who had his brown hair curled, nodded, he walked towards the wall indicated by the bald guy while shaking the can of spray paint, and started to spray the “Thousand” graffiti on the wall with practiced strokes.

When the graffiti was almost completed, the handphone in the pocket of the sports jacket of the bald guy started to ring. The phone ringtone was hip hop music. He put the phone next to his ear.

“Hello?”

The bald guy answered.

The call came from the person who directed another team of people.

“B-1 has been completed.”

That person said.

“You drew it on a high rise building, right?”

The bald guy asked as he jumped onto the nearby work table.

“Yeah~~it’s not really a high rise building, but a multi storey carpark. It’s really high, yeah.”

The other person answered.

“That’s good. The structure of the building is not an issue, height is the most important.”

After telling the other person that they can disperse, the bald guy hung up the phone.

After putting his phone back into his pocket, the bald guy jumped down from the table. Another member asked...

“Hey, will this really be okay?”

The person who a wide chin, and wore a knitted hat (like those normally worn by black people), asked the bald guy this.

“Hah? What will be okay?”

“What I mean is, will they come out if we continue doing this?”

“There’s no problem at all, it’s only the accumulating stage now, the Nura Gumi will move eventually.”

The bald guy nodded, looking satisfied.

Attacking hooligans and vandalizing the exterior of high rise buildings, these two actions are carried out together.

The graffiti on the exterior of the high rise buildings start from A-1, and now A-2 and B-1, these three places, have already been completed. The plan was proceeding smoothly. In addition, including the one today, this is the second time that they have attacked hooligans on the street. During the previous time in the alley, the brat collapsed where he stood after a few punches. Today was the first time they managed to force their prey into a high place, which can be considered a good result. Of course, next time they also plan to follow this method to force the other party to a high place, but they would need to consider situations in which they might not be successful in doing so. In the end, they cannot be anxious. For now, accumulating their numbers is more crucial.

“Teacher will now revise it once more with you, listen well.”

The bald guy pointed a finger at the black guy, and recited some song lyrics in a rap like rhythm.

"Nameless bad guys! All street urchins will be defeated! Only leaving the "Thousand" symbol! The same goes for other high rise buildings! The situation becomes stranger! Those damn youkai! They're really too strange! Order has broken down! Solve this quick quick quick! So this means the Nura Gumi youkai!"

"This means..." having sung to this part, the bald guy reverted back to his normal speaking tone. Faced with the sudden rap, the members already knew that their leader was that sort of person, so they did not look surprised at all.

"As long as we accumulate these strange happenings, a rumour about this would form and be spread around. Ukiyoe is Nura Gumi's territory, rumours would definitely reach them. After receiving the news, those people would start to investigate to find out what had happened, and as they search for the truth, they will meet us, then the battle will start, and we will win. That's it."

When he mentioned the word 'win', the bald guy punched his palm, which made a "Pa" sound. It sounded especially loud in the abandoned run down office.

"...Ukiyoe will belong to us soon, very soon."

"Just by our hands?"

Another member asked.

"Nonsense!"

The bald guy glared at that member.

"We don't need the strength of *that person*, it would be enough with just us, understand?"

Chapter 2

Kuromaru and the other two hovered in the night sky above Ukiyoe Town. Besides their wings, the Sanba Garasu look like humans.

The colour of the wings of the three young Karasu Tengus blended with the night sky, and they were at a rather high altitude. No matter how good someone's eyesight is, they could not be able to spot the Sanba Garasu from the ground.

The Sanba Garasu are currently holding a mid-air conference. The topic is obviously the "Thousand" graffiti. Lately, that was all they discussed after they completed their patrols.

In addition, the three youkai made their move today. There is a department store along the street below them, and there is new graffiti on the wall of the top floor, with a B-2 on the bottom right corner. Even since they started discovering the graffiti, this is already the fourth one.

The one who found it was Tosakamaru, who was patrolling at that time. Once they had received the message from the crows, Kuromaru and Sasami rushed to the scene and investigated the areas nearby, but it might be because some time had already passed after the completion of the graffiti, so the three youkai did not find any clues about the person who drew the graffiti.

“Seriously, who the heck drew this? Let’s just draw a “Fear” symbol over it.”

Tosakamaru said in frustration while scratching his rooster crown hairstyle.

“What’s the use in that? Our standards aren’t so low to resort to the same tactics as them.”

Sasami, wearing a red gem amongst all the green, said calmly.

“Yeah, you’re right about that...”

Tosakamaru said. Kuromaru could relate to the anxiety that he was feeling.

In this series of incidents, the Sanba Garasu were totally lagging behind. Until today, when they discovered the fourth graffiti on the wall of the high rise building, they are still unable to decipher the meaning behind the graffiti.

It was the same with the serial assaults that happened together with the graffiti. There were already five incidents amongst the verified information, and the “Thousand” graffiti could be found at the scene of the assault. Even though no marks like the A-1 mark were written, but from the general design, the ones who drew the graffiti and the people who attacked the young people were from the same group. However, no clues could be found pertaining to the two cases, and the number of victims continues to increase.

--And I still dared to say something about being a sensitive antenna, isn’t this allowing the group of people to do whatever they want?

Mocking himself while feeling all this anxiety, Kuromaru also had the same feelings.

There were too many questions to answer, even after a long discussion, the Sanba Garasu were unable to find an answer.

Take the meaning of “Thousand” as an example. The Arabian number “1000” was added on top, so this “Thousand” was not a ‘4’, which has a similar shape, but the word “Thousand”. But the motive behind using that word still remains unclear. “Thousand” is 10 times of hundred, representing a very large number. But even if the dictionary definition surfaced in their minds, the enemy’s motive is still unclear.

(Translator’s note: The character 千, when written messily, can resemble a ‘4’)

The letter and number on the bottom right corner of the graffiti was also a mystery.

The locations of the four graffiti discovered were all in Ukiyoe. A-1 is in the northern most area, and in the southwestern side is A-2. Southwest of A-2 is B-1. B-2, discovered today is about east of B-1. If A-1 is taken as the north-south reference, B-2 would be directly opposite B-1 on the east-west direction. What are those positions supposed to mean? Maybe there is no meaning to it at all, and the mystery cannot be solved.

“What if this wasn’t even done by youkai?”

Tosakamaru expressed his opinion.

“The ones who were attacked were human kids. And the action of spraying graffiti is immature in itself. It might be possible that humans did it?”

But Kuromaru shook his head.

“If so, there is still one problem that isn’t solved. Why do they want to spray graffiti in such a high place? And what kind of methods can the humans use to climb that high? The testimonies from the victims also confirmed these uncertainties. I still think that this incident has something to do with youkai.”

“The victims’ testimonies...are you talking about *floating in midair without any use of tools*?”

Sasami said. Kuromaru nodded.

For the five assault cases, three of the victims’ testimonies were very strange.

The youth who was attacked in the remains of a high rise building near the ghost city said this...

--They didn’t have ladders or ropes, but barged in from the fourth floor window! It was unbelievable!

The person who was attacked at the abandoned school said..

--A bald person suddenly appeared on the other side of the fence on the roof! My heart almost stopped beating from fright!

The person who was attacked at another abandoned building also said...

--I thought I would be safe once I ran to the fifth floor, but they ran in after breaking the window! Are they able to fly or something?

All these victim testimonials were acquired through Aotabou.

When Aotabou assumes his human form, he is the leader of the hot-blooded biker gang parade of hundred demons. The biker gang and street thugs are underground forces, so they would exchange information with one another.

Aotabou did say to Kuromaru before, “If you need help, then tell me”, but Kuromaru had no plans to do so at the moment.

“Actually, with regards to the victim testimonials, there is still one thing I’m really concerned about.”

Kuromaru put up his index finger as he finished the sentence.

“That is—the way they gather.”

“The way they gather?”

Tosakamaru’s eyes narrowed. Sasami also showed an expression that she did not understand.

Kuromaru continued to speak...

“The three victims who were attacked on the top floor or roof of buildings basically described a similar situation—the bald guy would break the window or climb over the fence at the beginning, appearing in front of the victims. That bald guy should be their leader. After that, some other members would enter using the same method, but it does not apply to everyone, there are some people *who would lag behind by climbing the stairs*. I am very concerned about this fact.”

Waiting for Kuromaru to finish speaking, Sasami continued...

“Which means, they separated and either appeared suddenly from a high place or used other methods, these two ways?”

Kuromaru nodded.

“If it’s like that...” Tosakamaru said in a low voice...

“I heard that they’re all human, right? Which means, some people are able to use spells, while others cannot, is it like that?”

--People who can use spells and people who cannot...

Kuromaru repeated this in his mind.

The people who can use spells can enter from the window or the fence, people who cannot only can use the stairs—a simple explanation like this is fine, but it felt like an unsatisfactory answer.

It seems that no one would be able to contribute their opinions, the Sanba Garasu became quiet, and silence fell on the group.

As if he could not stand the silence, Tosakamaru opened his mouth to say...

“Anyway, it would not be good to drag this out any longer. The human media is already publicising this incident.”

“That’s true.”

Sasami continued.

“I saw it on the news these few days. The report only talked about the graffiti on the walls, but did not mention the assault cases, but the connection between these two cases would be made one day. Once this incident gets more publicity, curious people looking for action would loiter around Ukiyoe, which would not be good at all. I do not welcome any situation that would threaten the peace of the territory.”

“But, what if the goal of that group of people “Thousand” is not the media, but us Nura Gumi...?”

Tosakamaru and Sasami turned to Kuromaru, who said that.

Kuromaru continued...

“Those people are making trouble around Ukiyoe, it’s impossible for them to be unaware that this place is watched by Nura Gumi. They are waiting for us to make a move.”

“You’re saying, that they are challenging us?”

Sasami said.

Kuromaru tensed, nodding.

“The action of drawing “Thousand” throughout the streets makes it obvious that they are challenging us Nura Gumi. Having the order messed up by curious humans is also a problem, but the biggest issue is who is doing what they please in our territory. Those people are not afraid of the Nura Gumi at all.”

“Then, what should we do?”

Tosakamaru said.

“Dispatch the crows, and strengthen our defence.”

Kuromaru said. The Sanba Garasu are able control every crow in the skies of Ukiyoe, and make them follow their orders. Crows, which are an irritating sight to the city people are very important spies to the Sanba Garasu.

“Mobilise every crow on the street, have them watch the high rise buildings, and report anything suspicious. Considering the number of high rise buildings in Ukiyoe, the scene of the crime might not be reached in time, but every method has to be tried. We cannot allow these people to go wild in our territory, understand?”

Hearing Kuromaru’s words, the two Karasu Tengu nodded fervently.

It has been decided to temporarily stop attacking brats.

Currently, the thugs on this street are filled with fear in their hearts, and they’re all travelling in groups, no one dares to walk outdoors by themselves.

That is to be expected. Five assault cases have occurred so far, no matter how dense these people who have been spoilt by peaceful times are, they should be more alert by now.

It doesn’t matter what they do. It’s possible for them to continue attacking those people moving in groups, but they do not wish to waste energy on this now. Because they did not come here in order to be at the top of the gangster world. When the group led by a bald guy attacked people, they would suddenly appear from a high place—their final objective was the spreading of such a rumour, and currently, everything was going well. By word of mouth and the internet, most of the young people in Ukiyoe already know about this.

It was the same for the graffiti on the walls of the high rise buildings. It caused a furore on the internet, and the news was broadcast on television. The spreading of the rumours was proceeding smoothly.

The bald guy led 30 or so members along the streets of Ukiyoe late at night. Even though it was a group of people, they were not clustered together, but kept a comfortable distance from one another, forming a rather dispersed formation.

The target building this time is in a place 100 metres in front of them.

At that moment, a call of “Caw--” could be heard from above. Looking up, several crows were circling the sky.

--There are so many crows tonight...

The bald guy thought to himself.

Chapter 3

“You said this would be the last time, is this true?”

Tosakamaru asked.

“I can’t confirm this now, but it’s very possible. The next one is the “Thousand” graffiti C-2, that is the last one.”

Kuromaru replied.

“What proof do you have?”

Sasami asked.

The Sanba Garasu are currently flying and talking at the same time. Kuromaru was the one leading the group, all of them are holding staffs in their hands and they were flying very quickly. They predicted that those people would most likely make their move to draw graffiti, so they are currently heading towards the buildings in the northern area of Ukiyoe.

The day before yesterday, they discovered another graffiti C-1. The crows reported the news to Kuromaru, who was patrolling at that time. The location of the graffiti was a bit to the south of A-1, a ten storey condominium, and it was painted on the exterior wall of the top floor. At that time, he searched the nearby areas for a while, but he did not find the ones who drew the graffiti, and he grew more and more frustrated, but he needed to calm himself down. Instead of being angry, it would be better to find a way to solve the problem.

At that moment, Kuromaru had a flash of inspiration, and tried to connect A-1 and A-2 on the map, and then connected B-1 and B-2. Then he quickly discovered the possible location of C-2.

“It’s the word “Thousand””.

Kuromaru said to the two other Karasu Tengu following him.

“Thousand?”

Tosakamaru’s voice raised in pitch.

“Yeah, it’s the kanji version of “Thousand” (千). Think about the locations of the five graffiti which were already found, then see what happens when you connect A-1 and A-2, and B-1 and B-2...do you see it? Doesn’t it look like the first and second stroke of “Thousand” (千)?”

Tosakamaru suddenly let out an “Ah” sound.

“A large 千”

The low voice of Sasami could be heard next to him.

“That’s right.” Kuromaru nodded.

“They are trying to draw out a large “Thousand” in Ukiyoe. This word is made up of three strokes. Extending the line from C-1 for the third stroke would be the location for the C-2 graffiti. Those people would draw their sixth graffiti there.”

“Is that why you said the next one is the last time? What kind of joke is this?”

“I hope that this large “Thousand” is nothing but a prank.”

Sasami said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tosakamaru said, his voice filled with surprise.

Sasami continued...

“For example, after the completion of the large “Thousand”, a magical barrier will be activated...that’s not an impossible scenario, right?”

“Oi oi, something like that can happen?”

Tosakamaru laughed it off.

“Using graffiti to make a barrier? That’s not possible, it’s only a bunch of idiots who want to act cool.”

“Let’s not care if it’s being used to activate a spell, in the end...”

Kuromaru explained their objective...

“We cannot allow them to draw the last graffiti. We have to be one step ahead of them, and stop them no matter what.”

“Have you figured out which building it would be?”

Sasami asked.

“I have a rough idea.”

Kuromaru answered.

“Considering the balance of the word “Thousand”, I think that it would be around this area. The previous five graffiti all start from the tenth floor, with the highest floor being the 15th. As long as we watch all the buildings which are around that height in this area, they will definitely appear.”

After saying, “Let’s go, quickly”, Kuromaru sped up. The other two also followed close behind.

The Sanba Garasu arrived at the target area a short time later.

Luckily for them, this area was not a city area or a commercial area. About 10 to 15 storeys high, and would fit the location for the third stroke of the word “Thousand”, only three buildings here fulfilled these conditions.

These three places were two neighbouring high rise condominiums and a commercial building about 50m south.

The Sanba Garasu are keeping watch in the sky where they can see all three buildings.

They were keeping a watch behind the condominium, as well as the front and sides of the commercial building, the places they cannot see would be patrolled by the crows from the sky.

Next would be a battle of patience.

Thirty minutes have passed, but nothing happened, and another thirty minutes passed. It was now the middle of the night, and the crowds within the area of surveillance have decreased significantly.

“Maybe nothing will happen at all tonight.”

The one who complained was Tosakamaru.

Kuromaru did not reply at all. This little brother of his was always the anxious type, and wanted to reach conclusions quickly. But it was still too early to decide if anything will happen.

Just then, a car with a low body passed through the area with the exhaust producing a loud noise, making all three Karasu Tengu tense up, but in the end, it was just picking up a lady who had walked out of the condominium.

One and a half hours have already passed, but Kuromaru did not give up. Even though he was not that confident about his deduction skills, but those people will definitely appear. If today did not work out, there was still tomorrow, Kuromaru decided that he would keep watch here tomorrow as well.

They have hovered in the air for close to two hours. Just then—

A group of young people were walking on the pedestrian path towards the area behind the condominium. Their location was on the left side of their surveillance area, and they were walking from north to south. This group, made up of about 30 people, stopped just behind the condominium.

The Sanba Garasu glanced at one another. Then they erased their youki, and flew to a lower position.

The lights nearby were able to illuminate the area behind the condominium. Therefore, they were able to see what the young people were wearing. All of them were dressed like gangsters.

The Sanba Garasu could hear the sound of a spray paint can being shaken.

“Should we make a move?”

Tosakamaru asked in a low voice. Kuromaru shook his head lightly.

These “people” have a 80% chance of being the ones who painted the “Thousand” graffiti. But there wasn’t any sufficient evidence, and there was no way to tell if they’re human or youkai.

Let’s observe a little longer, Kuromaru gave an expression to convey this message to the other two Karasu Tengu.

Kuromaru’s greatest question is the way they painted the graffiti. This top floor of this condominium was at least 20m off the ground.

--Maybe they have wings like us Karasu Tengu, and they would fly up?

The one holding the spray can was a youth with curly brown hair. But the first person to approach the wall was not that youth, but another person. The youth who approached the wall had a strong body structure. He placed both hands on the wall, and positioned his feet such that they were in line with his shoulders.

What happened later shocked the Sanba Garasu into speechlessness.

With a ‘Shuu’ sound, another youth jumped on the shoulders of the strong looking youth. Then that youth, just like the first one, placed both his hands on the wall. And another youth lightly climbed up the body of the second youth, becoming the person at the top, and waited for the fourth person to come up.

A youth standing on the shoulders of another youth, then another youth would climb onto his shoulders, the human ladder was gradually constructed in this manner. Seeing this situation, the last person would be the one holding the spray can, standing at the top of the ladder to paint the graffiti.

Seeing the youths quickly climb up the ladder, Tosakamaru said with a tone akin to a sigh...

“Are these people...monkeys?”

Surely, this image of climbing to high places without fear is like a monkey climbing a tree. But from Kuromaru’s point of view, they do not look like monkeys at all.

Using their flexible limbs to jump to a high place, and slowly increasing the height reached by the ladder—these are not monkeys, but other species of animal. Just then, the word “Thousand” suddenly appeared in his mind.

“Thousand...”

Kuromaru said it out loud, the next second, he widened his eyes in realisation.

--That's right, these guys are...

"The Thousand Bolt Wolves!" (Also known as the Senbiki Ookami as the romanised translation)

"Thousand...Thousand what?"

Tosakamaru asked again.

Kuromaru explained...

"Thousand Bolt Wolves. A group of one thousand wolves. There are legends about them everywhere."

Stories say that someone was attacked by a pack of wolves on a certain mountain, and escaped to the top of a tree. However, he could only relax for a moment, the pack of wolves actually jumped on the shoulders of one another, attempting to climb the tree. They added layer after layer, forming a wolf ladder. Seeing such a freaky scene, one would be gripped with fear just thinking about it. Fierce wild wolves with dense fur pile up, pile up, and pile up, forming a ladder, closing in on the target—

"A wolf ladder, no wonder..."

Tosakamaru said with an alert look.

The ladder made by the youths gradually increased in height, and they were about to reach the top floor. When the youth holding the spray can approached the ladder, Sasami said...

"Kuromaru."

"I know."

Kuromaru gave a curt reply. Observation time was over.

He waved the spear he held in one hand, and then threw it towards the base of the ladder—the strong looking youth.

The staff cut through the air and pierced the ground right next to the youth's feet. The nearly completed ladder crumbled in an instant. The youths scattered in the air, but not one of them fell to the ground in a pathetic manner, all of them landed beautifully.

"Who the hell did this?"

The one who walked out of the group, shouting, was a bald youth wearing a sports jacket. The youth who was described to be the boss mentioned in the testimonials, would most likely be this guy.

"Tosakamaru, Sasami, it's time to do some cleaning."

Chapter 4

--This place is too small, and can be seen by other people. Let's go to another place to talk.

The two groups of people, who faced each other behind the condominium, moved to another location suggested by the bald guy.

Once they reached the sports field of an abandoned school nearby, the two parties faced each other once again.

The sports field did not have any illumination facilities. It was complete darkness. The bald guy spoke, assuming an aggressive stance once more.

“Nura Gumi, I have waited for a long time. Let me introduce myself again. We are the Thousand Bolt Wolves group, from the lands in the north. I am the Young Boss there.”

“I am Kuromaru from the Nura Gumi Main House. They are Tosakamaru and Sasami.”

Kuromaru introduced himself as well.

In the overly huge sports field of the abandoned school, the Thousand Bolt Wolves possess 30 or so members. Kuromaru, facing them, only has three people. It’s a battle between “Three” and “Thousand”.

In terms of numbers, the other party have an overwhelming advantage, but Kuromaru did not feel threatened at all. In fact he was thinking—if the enemy is the Thousand Bolt Wolves, all of the happenings would make sense.

Because they are the Thousand Bolt Wolves, they would paint the “Thousand” graffiti.

Because they are the Thousand Bolt Wolves, they would have a way to climb to a high place to write the words.

When they attack people, the question of why didn’t all the wolves enter from the window or the fence, but some of them would climb up the stairs, can be explained in a reasonable manner after knowing their wolf ladder trick.

The wolves who climb the ladder can break and enter through the window, *but the ladder itself cannot do the same*. Once they send their comrades to the top floor, the wolves who make up the ladder would have to use the building’s stairs to head to the highest floor. Even though they have a more disadvantageous role, but it cannot be helped. That was how the Thousand Bolt Wolves operated. Then again, their goal was not to find a better method of doing things, only to spread rumours. After an unexplainable attack method becomes a rumour, the Nura Gumi would appear, that is their true goal.

“Let me make this clear to you--”

Kuromaru hit the ground once with his staff.

“This is Nura Gumi’s territory. No one here is allowed to paint meaningless graffiti or conduct violent activities.”

The bald young boss gave a snort.

“Meaningless graffiti? You’re really blunt. This is very cool art, okay?”

“The way you put it really irks me.”

The one who said it was Sasami.

“After cleaning up those unsightly graffiti, disappear from Ukiyoe immediately, all of you.”

“You don’t have to be so fierce, glasses girl~”

The young boss gave a troubled smile, and rubbed his bald head. Then his tone of voice turned into a RAP, and he started singing...

“Thousand will not disappear! The wolves will not go back! We came to destroy the Nura Gumi! The youkai’s...supreme commander? Who cares about if he’s a supreme commander! Who cares how great he was before! We’re not interested at all! Reach the top and stand up! Build a tower and stand up! The wolves’ tower! The wolves’ pyramid! We are the leaders! The new leaders would be us! The thousand who rule here! Thousand! Thousand Bolt Wolves!”

Seeing the young boss break in RAP like he had lapsed into a mental illness, Kuromaru still remained calm, not reacting at all.

Sasami shook her head lightly.

“I’m getting angrier...”

Tosakamaru commented sarcastically...

“This bastard, his head is broken.”

The Sanba Garasu all had rather cold reactions, but the young boss did not mind at all. He even showed an expression of satisfaction.

Kuromaru put up his index finger, saying...

“Regarding those meaningless graffiti, let me clarify one thing. You came here today to draw the last graffiti?”

“Yeah, you also knew this is the last one. That means you also...know our purpose?”

“Purpose...?”

Ah? You didn’t find out?”

Kuromaru took a deep breath. The issue that was mentioned on the way to the surveillance area resurfaced in his head. Which is what Sasami was worried about—when the large “Thousand” is complete, a large spell would be cast...

The young boss gave a sly smile, and continued...

“The sixth “Thousand” will complete something...that is...”

He paused on purpose. Kuromaru glared in his direction.

“That is...a large ‘Thousand’ will appear in Ukiyoe!”

“... ..”

Kuromaru waited for a while. But the young boss did not continue speaking.

Kuromaru, maintaining an expression face, cleared his throat and said...

“Then what?”

“What then...then what?”

The young boss asked, pouting. Kuromaru spoke again...

“I’m saying, what happens after you’ve completed it? I know you want to complete a large ‘Thousand’, but what will happen after that? Would it be something like a barrier?”

“Bar...barrier?”

The young boss’ voice suddenly raised in pitch. Then he said in a rough tone of voice...

“What...what barrier? It’s only a large ‘Thousand’, a really huge ‘Thousand’!”

“It’s only big?”

“Yeah! You’ve got a problem with that?!”

“Nothing. I just needed a confirmation.”

“The hell with your calm attitude! I just want it big, okay! This is a great work of art! What kind of attitude is that?!”

The reactions of Kuromaru and the rest was not expected by the young boss, and he was unhappy about that.

Kuromaru exhaled lightly.

“So this is the situation, Tosakamaru. Looks like you were right.”

Hearing Kuromaru say that, Tosakamaru humph-ed.

“They really were a bunch of brats trying to act cool...”

“Hey! Stop being so relaxed! You asking for death?”

The young boss shouted as he sent some soil flying with a kick.

“If it’s like that, then attack quickly.”

Kuromaru said with an even tone of voice.

“We have already asked all we needed to ask. Next we will tell you what the difference in level is.”

“Sure, stinking crows! Hey—all of you!”

The young boss announced to group that he leads...

“Don’t hold back! Pluck out their feathers, and turn them all into fried chicken! Aroo--”

The young boss produced a strange sound as he shouted. The long note at the end sounded like a wild wolf howling in the distance.

His comrades also stretched out their neck, and started to answer with cries of “Woo--”, “Woo--”. After the howls from the wolf pack went on for a while, the young boss’ voice quickly adopted a fierce tone.

“So, I’m coming--”

Without finishing his sentence, the young boss suddenly bent over, making contact with the ground. The body started sprouting hard hairs, ripping his clothes, slowly enveloping his whole body, his face also transformed into that of a dog—no, it was the appearance of a wolf.

It was not only the young boss who had transformed, but all the members of the Thousand Bolt Wolves have turned into wolves.

The scene of 30 wolves emitting youki was a rather eerie scene.

--Strong

Kuromaru thought. He made a judgement immediately, and thought that it would be best not to underestimate or make fun of this group of youkai. Tosakamaru and Sasami should have thought the same way, and they would not make a mistake of misjudging the enemies’ strength.

They did not communicate with each other, the Sanba Garasu also transformed quickly at the same time. They deactivated their human forms, and turned back into their Tengu forms with crow heritage. The youki which they suppressed expanded in an instant, clashing violently with the youki of the wolf pack.

The Sanba Garasu raised their staffs. The ‘bells’ at the front rung simultaneously.

The wolf pack rushed towards them, accompanied with a series of growls.

The attack of the wolf pack is split into two parts. Some just rushed in a direct attack, some jumped and attacked from above.

Facing the approaching wolf pack, the Sanba Garasu used their staff to push them back one by one with knocks, sweeps and thrusts.

The one commanding the army of foes is the young boss. He was very skilled with the use of his men. He let the injured wolves retreat to the back immediately, then he would send those at the back who have already recovered to the battlefield once more. In that way, the number of injured would not accumulate, and fresh forces can be sent at any time, the overall speed and judgement of the team would not be compromised.

Without realising it, the Sanba Garasu were slowly being surrounded. But the three Karasu Tengu knew how to avoid being penetrated by various attacks, so they did not commit the mistake of being surrounded individually.

A wolf, eyes shining because of the battle, charged over. Thrusting the base of the spear at the wolf's nose, the wolf gave a rough cry and retreated to the back. Next, a wolf, snout wet with saliva, pounced from the top. An upward thrust with the staff, before sending him flying to the side.

--Why does it feel that the fight is never-ending?

Kuromaru thought to himself. And—

“Hey, aren't their numbers increasing?”

Tosakamaru said as he defeated the enemies.

True, the numbers have increased significantly. There were only 30 wolves in the beginning, but without realising it, the numbers have increased by a few times.

“They might have been called by the howl just now!”

Kuromaru replied loudly.

The howl before the battle called for the comrades which were scattered in various places.

Two wolves charged forward at the same time. Kuromaru assumed a stance, ready to receive the attack. At that moment, another wolf appeared, using the two wolves as a stepping board to jump higher, pouncing at Kuromaru. That wolf was the young boss. Their eyes met in mid air.

Kuromaru, whose shoulders were stepped on, fell to the ground. The foul smell of wild beasts emitted from the mouth. Just as Kuromaru's neck was about to be bitten—

“Kuromaru!”

Sasami rushed over in time, swinging her staff downwards. The young boss evaded in time, jumping to the side. Kuromaru took the chance to quickly get back on his feet.

The three Karasu Tengu stood back to back, not moving. The Thousand Bolt wolves surrounded them from the outside, forming a circle.

“The Nura Gumi's crows are good, as I thought.”

The young boss said. As he spoke, his tongue was hanging out, panting.

“But, it's time we ended this. We didn't come here to fight with you. Destroying the Nura Gumi would be our goal.”

Kuromaru narrowed his eyes in alert. The enemy's youki suddenly changed. Just as he sensed that—

The young boss let out a strange cry of “Wo wo--”

It looks like that it was a signal to change formation. The wolf pack, forming a circle, started to move.

They climbed onto each other's bodies, beginning to make a ladder. It looks like it won't be just one ladder, but three of them. The wolves' movements are organised, and three ladders were made quickly. Every ladder has 20 wolves, forming a high, eerie looking wolf tower, at the wolf at the top

cannot be seen clearly. Only the young boss did not join any of the ladders, walking back and forth on the ground.

The three ladders faced each of the Karasu Tengu, who were back to back with one another.

“Thank you for gathering here today.”

The young wolf boss said as he walked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The question did not receive an answer, but the ladders started to move. The three ladders did not move towards the Sanba Garasu, but walked to the side in one direction, as if they were drawing a circle. Even though they did not hold hands, but the movement is like the game Caged Bird. Next the speed of the movements accelerated, even creating after images, turning into a wall made up of dense fur or a cylindrical object covered in fur. The container made up of wolves, slowly surrounded the Sanba Garasu. (Translator’s note: Caged Bird is a children’s game in Japan. They hold hands, singing while walking around in circles, after the song is finished, the person acting as the “It” or oni in the middle must guess who is behind them)

Seeing the rapidly spinning wolf container, Kuromaru couldn’t help but show a stern expression.

--What kind of attack is this?

Kromaru discovered that the top half of the container was getting narrower. The wolves on the top of the three ladders were turning and getting closer to each other at the same time. When the three wolves at the top connected together, the wolf container turned into a shape of a hanging bell. No, this is not a bell, but a cage. It looked very similar to a bird cage.

“Ha ha ha! YO! Surround them! Close them in! Caged bird WOW!”

The young boss sang the children’s song in a rap like manner, showing a malicious expression.

“Mr crow, the cage I made using wolves—‘Wolf pack army cage’, are you comfortable living in it?”

“A lame pun game. The technique is lame too.” (Translator’s note: “Wolf pack” and “army cage” are both pronounced as GUNROO in Japanese)

Kuromaru only threw out that one sentence.

“Trapping us in a cage, is that all? You’re only using a bunch of wolves to exaggerate your reputation.”

“It’s doesn’t matter if you continue speaking like that, you damn crow.”

The young boss lowered his stance.

“The most entertaining part begins now!”

After saying that, the young boss immediately jumped towards the wall. The wall turning at high speed caused the young wolf boss to bounce off, multiplying his speed by a few times.

The young boss jumped towards the Sanba Garasu at unprecedented speed, attacking. The bullet like speed grazed the front of the shoulder, and part of the armour was damaged.

--Fast!

As Tosakamaru thought this, he let out a short cry, a claw mark like wounds appeared on his face. After attacking Kuromaru, the young boss swiftly flew towards Tosakamaru, leaving claw marks on his face, then kicked the wall again, jumping towards Sasami. Sasami let out a groan as well.

The body of the young wolf boss weaved around like a bungee cord. One wolf bullet shot around the wolf cage with the speed of lightning, and there was no way to predict when he would attack—this is the “Wolf pack army cage”

The young boss, who jumped all around, grew in speed, making it difficult for the naked eye to catch up. Only the after image and voice were left.

“Ha! Damn crows, how is this? This is our speed! If you kneel down and beg me, I could spare your life? But, you’ll have a kowtow a thousand times!”

“I see...”

Kuromaru spoke as he used his staff to block off an attack from the young boss...

“It is surprising. But...it’s still over exaggerated.”

“What!”

“When you wanted to draw the large ‘Thousand’, you were happy as long as it was big enough, this made me believe even more that you guys just love to over exaggerate. But that sort of small ambition would not invoke fear in your opponents.”

“Don’t just stand there making useless comments! Are you able to break through this technique?”

“I’ve said this at the beginning, wanting you to know what the differences in level are...Thousand Bolt Wolves, don’t underestimate the flying prowess of the Karasu Tengu clan.”

After finishing his sentence, he shifted his line of sight to Tosakamaru and Sasami.

“Tosakamaru, Sasami...*we’re flying.*”

The two Karasu Tengu answered with a nod.

The next second, the youki of the three Karasu Tengu suddenly increased. Until the wings on their back and every single feather was filled with youki.

The Sanba Garasu bent their knees, lowering their stance, waiting for the chance to jump and fly. They waited for the breathing to sync, before flying into the sky together.

In an instant, the Sanba Garasu broke through the wolf cage. To the edge of the sky they flew.

After breaking through the wolf cage, the attack from the Sanba Garasu did not end. They continued to increase their altitude, almost breaking through the cloud layer, and then turning around suddenly, they descended rapidly upon the half destroyed wolf cage.

“Tremble in fear, wolves!”

“This is the difference in levels!”

“Remember this with your bodies!”

The Sanba Garasu descended from the sky. Kuromaru, Tosakamaru and Sasami—three god speed arrows pierced through the wolf pack. The wolf cage dissolved instantly, and flew apart in an explosive like manner.

“You—alllllll!”

As the young head shouted with an extended cry, tens of wolves fell on the sports field one after another, groaning.

After the last wolf hit the ground, and groaned once, the surroundings turned quiet.

Holding their staffs, with an aggressive stance, the Sanba Garasu were filled with youki, giving off an awe-inspiring feeling. In contrast, the young wolf boss looked like he had taken a huge blow.

“Do you understand, Thousand Bolt Wolves? This is the strength of the Nura Gumi.”

Kuromaru said.

The young boss tensed up, growled in a low voice, and said...

“Who...who are you kidding! It’s not over yet! The strength of the Thousand Bolt Wolves isn’t just this...”

“Don’t push yourself. All your comrades have been incapacitated.”

Tosakamaru pointed to his comrades with his staff. That’s right, just like Tosakamaru said, the wolf pack has already lost all their fighting spirit.

“Stop yapping! Oi, don’t lie on the ground, get up quickly! Do the wolf pack army cage again...”

“It’s no use, Thousand Bolt Wolves.”

Kuromaru said in a disinterested way.

“That move is no use anymore. You can’t beat us just with your own power.”

“Ah?”

“It’s almost done, Thousand Bolt Wolves.”

Kuromaru said quietly. It was time to reveal everything.

"You can't win us, so shouldn't it be time to call for your boss? Thousand Bolt Wolves, *that is the rule for youkai like you*, isn't it?"

The instant Kuromaru said that, the young wolf boss widened his eyes suddenly.

"Shut up Shut up Shut up Shut up Shut up! Boss? There is no such person like that! Who wants to depend on him! We can handle everything ourselves! I don't need that guy's power at all!"

The young wolf boss shouted loudly, baring his fangs.

"Kuromaru, what rule?"

Tosakamaru asked, whispering.

Kuromaru said...

"There are many versions of the legend of the Thousand Bolt Wolves, the details are all different, *but the last plot development is the same.*"

...The wolves, standing on each other shoulders, make a ladder to capture the prey in the tree, but they are short of one step to reach the goal. Just then, one of the wolves will shout loudly...

--Call grandmother here!

Grandmother is their boss. Letting the boss stand on the top of the ladder will enable them to reach the location of the prey. Which means, the last part which they are lacking will be filled in by the boss.

In the legend of the wolves making a ladder, the last section will always increase a bridge of calling the boss.

There are youkai bound by rules in the world. The Thousand Bolt Wolves are youkai *which must follow the rules.*

"When I say there's no need, there's no need! Why do we have to call the boss, as long as the young boss, me, is here, that is enough!"

The young wolf boss shouted, huffing. Kuromaru only shook his head quietly.

"You're really pathetic. If you don't call your boss, which can fill in your weaknesses, you can forget about defeating us, ever."

"Stop saying nonsense! Who the hell would call that old hag for help! We came here to prove that..."

"Who are you calling an old hag?"

A voice suddenly interrupted their conversation. The young boss froze momentarily.

From the group of injured wolves, a big lady with a pinned up kimono walked up with heavy sounding footsteps. The lady with pinned up silver hair might be called an old lady, but her muscles were still very firm.

“M...mom!”

The young wolf boss shouted.

Chapter 5

“Why are you here...?”

The young wolf boss asked with a high pitched voice, but was immediately punched by the large sized woman. Then the lady said...

“Idiot! You haven’t been home for almost a month, and bought so many of your brothers with you, and even made the news with your antics, anyone would have figured that it was done by you! Now you even made trouble in other people’s territory, you big idiot!”

‘Bam’, another fist came down. The young wolf boss gave another groan.

“Are you from the Nura Gumi?”

The lady turned and faced the Sanba Garasu.

“I am Kuromaru, are you the leader of the Thousand Bolt Wolves?”

The lady nodded.

“That’s right. My name is Nesantarou obasan, but they refer to me and Lady Boss or Mom more often...my idiotic son caused all of you so much trouble, I’m so sorry about that...oi, how long do all of you want to stay in your wolf form?! Turn back into your human form quickly, and apologise to these people!”

After being shouted at by the group leader, the injured wolf pack slowly changed back into their human forms. Only the young wolf boss resisted.

“Wait a minute, mom! Aren’t you going to fight with them? Mom should turn into a wolf too!”

“You damn brat! Still talking about these things now!”

The group leader raised her fist, and the young wolf boss quickly jumped out of the way. Then he reluctantly changed back into the form of the youth wearing a sports jacket.

“He’s like that, loves to retort. He always resists me.”

The leader continued speaking with regret...

“When the Thousand Bolt Wolves fight, in the end, I would have to appear as the leader to wrap things up, this child seems to hate this ever since a long time ago. He always said “We don’t need Mom’s help! We can also fight on our own, expand our territory by ourselves...”, bothering you guys in the end...”

Even though she’s the leader, but she looked like a mother who was embarrassed by the bad things her son had done.

Kuromaru said, still with the same serious and stern tone of voice...

"We're sorry that we had hurt your son. But protecting the territory is our job, please understand."

"Please don't say that, of course I understand. We would definitely not come here to make trouble again. The graffiti that these children painted, I will tell them to clean it before leaving, please forgive us."

Kuromaru and the rest nodded. So the leader barked at her children to get ready to go home.

Under the leadership of their mother, the Thousand Bolt Wolves left the abandoned school's sports field. The young boss even turned around on the way out, and said to Kuromaru and the rest...

"Hey, the three of you! Don't think this means that you have defeated the Thousand Bolt Wolves! Our mom is actually very strong! If mom turned into a wolf and executed the Wolf pack army cage..."

"I forbid you from saying any more unnecessary things!"

Having been told off by his mother, "Get a move on!", the young boss ended up being dragged off by the ear. Seeing the young boss shouting in pain, Sasami said to herself...

"She's such a good leader."

"Yeah. Or we should say, just like a good mother."

Tosakamaru said, laughing.

The back of the silver haired lady, which went further and further away, looked really reliable. When transformed, she would probably become a silver wolf.

--Covered in silver fur, a kind and strong silver wolf. Kuromaru couldn't help but imagine this.

After the fight at the abandoned school, Kuromaru reported the whole incident to his father, Karasu Tengu.

--Good work, luckily it didn't escalate into a disaster.

Karasu Tengu only said that one sentence. Not showering any praise at all was just like how father would act.

After two days, the 'Thousand' graffiti have all disappeared. The Thousand Bolt Wolves kept their promise, cleaning up all the graffiti before leaving. After the crows on the street saw that they have finished cleaning, they told Kuromaru about it.

Rikuo's voice drifted over from the corridor of the mansion, it was some time after the rumours started spreading, the time when they started to dissipate.

"Kuromaru."

"Yes, young master. What is it?"

Night Rikuo sat with his legs crossed, a wine bottle and wine cup in hand.

“When I discovered the ‘Thousand’ word with you...I forgot when that happened. I heard that the number of those things increased, and caused a commotion, but I haven’t heard anything recently?”

“Oh, that. I already asked the one responsible for the graffiti to clean it up.”

Kuromaru answered with the serious tone he is used to adopting.

“That person, was it you?”

“I’ll get angry if you say stuff like that, Young Master.”

“Of course I was joking with you. You don’t have to be so serious. But...thanks.”

Seeing Rikuo smile slightly, Kuromaru’s face broke into a smile for an instant. But he immediately reverted back into his serious expression, and said to Rikuo...

“It’s nothing. This is my duty.”

END

Nurarihyon no Mago 1st Novel: Ukiyoe Tales

Story 4: Ukiyoe celebration – Sakura

Swinging Nenekirimaru downwards with power, cutting through the shell known as Lady Yodo, causing eerie youki to burst out like smoke, the fox Hagoromo Gitsune showed her original form.

--I curse all of you! I will curse your future generations forever...I will curse all your descendents...all your children and grandchildren, will all be binded by the curse of I, Hagoromo Gitsune!

After casting a curse on Nurarihyon and the Keikain family, Hagoromo Gitsune vanished into the horizon.

In the battle history of the Nura Gumi, this battle would be known as “The battle of Kyoto and Osaka”.

The setting of the story would be after the battle, near the conclusion. It also considers Nurarihyon standing at the top of all youkai, becoming the Lord of Pandemonium.

In addition, what Nurarihyon obtained did not consist of only that title—

At Osaka castle, where Hagoromo Gitsune no longer exists, Nurarihyon, covered in wounds, was currently watching the lightening sky. Just then, someone ran over clumsily.

It was Youhime, who had been imprisoned by Hagoromo Gitsune.

Youhime, who was hugged by Nurarihyon on top of the roof of Osaka Castle, was blushing slightly.

“Let me heal your wounds...from now on, allow me to...stay by your side forever...”

After a long period of hesitation and unwillingness to answer after the Supreme Commander Nurarihyon proposed, this is the final answer Youhime gave him.

Many beams of light shone through the clouds.

This light is the blessings given to congratulate the union of youkai and human, as well as the signs of the approaching Tokugawa era.

Chapter 1

“Okay, there’s no more time for all of you to drag things out! In a moment (about two hours), the marriage ceremony between Supreme Commander and Youhime-san would start! Keep your hands working!”

The kitchen was filled to its maximum capacity by standing youkai, hard at work. Amongst that, Karasu Tengu kept flapping his wings, flying all around, shouting words of motivation continuously.

The Nura Gumi, under the command of the Supreme Commander, have already returned to their mansion in Edo. After the end of the bloody battle in Osaka, they went to the Keikain house in Kyoto immediately to host a banquet, to celebrate the end of the battle as well as to recharge, then they returned to the Main House in Edo.

This journey, can be viewed as a glorious return from being victorious.

The Nura Gumi, with the goal of being at the top of the youkai world, charged into Kyoto, and they really achieved their wish in the end. Just this is already considered a very outstanding achievement, and with the addition of having to prepare for the marriage ceremony of the Supreme Commander Nurarihyon once they returned to the mansion, it was like the icing on a cake.

Nurarihyon's marriage partner is a human. A daughter from a noble house in Kyoto, her name is Youhime.

The youkai who stayed back to guard the mansion all got a shock when they heard this news, the youkai from the other clans were very surprised when they heard the news about this as well, and discussed it a lot behind their back.

--The Supreme Commander of the Nura Gumi, is he stupid?

There were even youkai who said such a thing.

The Supreme Commander's attendant Karasu Tengu, also found it hard to believe at first.

The union of human and youkai may not be the first in history, but it still happened very rarely. And such a rare occurrence actually happened close to him, it was really unimaginable.

But, after the feelings of disbelief have dissipated, the thought "The Supreme Commander is amazing, as expected of our leader" Surfaced in their minds.

"No common sense" should not be just an insult, it can also be used to describe a person's magnificent personality.

In Karasu Tengu's opinion, the qualities of the Lord of Pandemonium should not be restricted to the fighting abilities as a youkai. If one's way of living is bland without any interesting quirks, charismatic leadership will always be rather lacking. However, if a person is not bounded by common sense and does things above the laws of society, then it will materialize into the strong charisma, attracting hundreds of youkai followers.

After reaching his own conclusion, Karasu Tengu decided on what he should do—to be in charge of all the matters regarding the wedding today, and have everything done perfectly.

Even though it's supposed to be a wedding preparation, but in terms of position, he does not need to go as far as being the matchmaker. The marriage between humans and youkai do not have any strict rules or rituals, so there are no prior examples to follow. If a name has to be given, it would be a name like the Senior Supervisor.

After the end of the marriage ceremony, next would obviously be the celebration banquet, so the members who live nearby and are treated like relatives have already been invited to attend the banquet. If the situation arises in which the food is served too slowly or there is not enough food, the Main House may lose face. As the Senior Supervisor, he would need to pay attention to all these small details.

Youkai transporting food and wine, youkai in charge of cooking, youkai setting the cutlery...the kitchen was transformed into a battlefield by busy youkai entering and leaving, making a huge racket everywhere.

“Karasu Tengu-sama, where should I put these mountain vegetables?”

The youkai carrying a basket full of mountain vegetables on its back is Yamachichi from the Yamanba Clan. This type of youkai live in the mountains, and are knowledgeable about produce from the mountain.

“Oh, thank you. Put it next to that stove then.”

Karasu Tengu instructed. Next were those that live in the river areas, part of the Kappa species, bringing with them a fish trap filled with fish.

“Karasu Tengu-sama, what should I do with these fish?”

“Oh, there’s quite a lot there. Bring it to get processed immediately.”

The youkai asking for instructions did not stop at all, Karasu Tengu answered all of them quickly.

“Karasu Tengu-sama, how about the rice?”

A Nyuudou with a large stature asked, carrying a sack of rice.

“Yes, bring it to get cooked immediately.”

“How about the miso?”

Two three eyed youkai brought a bucket of miso over.

“What do we do about this dish?”

The female youkai who asked is a Rokuro-kubi, her body is in a place very far away. (Translator’s note: Rokuro-kubi is a long neck youkai)

“Put it in that corner first and stack it up—eh? Who put a bottle in a place like this?”

Karasu Tengu used his staff to knock against the bottle blocking the way.

“It hurts!”

The bottle turned around. This bottle is not a bottle, but a youkai that looks like a bottle.

“Wah!...It’s you Kamaosa. Seriously, messing with people’s senses like that...”

Items which gradually turn into youkai after a very long time are known as Tsukumogami, Kamaosa would be one of them. Besides Kamaosa, there were also a lot of other Tsukumogami working busily in the kitchen.

For example, Narigama, who had turned from an iron kettle. They have hands and legs, and can move around freely, but now they are quietly sitting on the stove getting baked. The youkai blowing

into the bamboo type towards the fire is also a Tsukumogami, known as the Tripod Cat (五徳猫), it's a cat youkai with a tripod on its head, and is good at controlling the strength of the fire. (Translator's note: The 五徳 is a pot support tripod used in Japanese stove to hold the pot.)

"Isn't the fire a bit strong?"

Narigama asked worriedly as its lid was pushed by the steam until it clattered.

"Relax nya"

The Tripod Cat replied.

The youkai currently preparing wine bottles next to the wine barrel is a Tsukumogami known as Seto Taishou. On first sight, they look like warriors wearing armour, but the armour they are wearing is actually ceramic, this group of Taishou lined up the bottles quickly and precisely, and clanking could be heard every time they moved.

"Choku, enter!"

Under the command of the Seto Taishou who had lined up the wine bottles, a group of small Buddhist monks suddenly appeared. They are a type of Tsukumogami, known as Chokuboron, wearing the wine cups on their head like Hajimaki, about the same height as Kamaosa. This group of Choku filed into a single line and walked forward, and stopped when they were lined up next to the wine bottles that Seto Taishou lined up. Then—

"Transform!"

After receiving the command from the Seto Taishou, the Chokuboron suddenly changed into a line of wine cups. Their coordinated movements were as enthralling as watching a performance.

"Good job", seeing them working hard, Karasu Tengu said this while nodding. No matter which youkai, everybody was working very hard, because everyone knew how important today is.

Just then, a shadow flitted past Karasu Tengu. It was Natto Kozo. He had no business here but was still running around in a kitchen full of youkai, which already caused a lot of trouble for everyone, but—

"I steal~~!"

Natto Kozo said as he reached for the cooked yam.

"Ah! Hey! Natto, no pinching food!"

"But I'm very hungry yan~"

"What yan! Pinching food shows bad upbringing! If you have so much time to hang around, then go help out!"

"Sure, I'll help."

After Natto Kozo answered rather reluctantly, he started to pour Natto on top of a small bowl, which held a stewed dish.

“See, isn’t this more delicious now?”

“Oh ho, I see, it would be more delicious with an additional process...idiot! Who asked you to do more than necessary!...Ah! Don’t run! Come back here!”

He wanted to chase after Natto Kozo who ran away, but decided to let it slide.

The job of the Senior Supervisor is very hectic, but he cannot leave the kitchen, resulting in a rather unpleasant feeling.

“Um...cough, we will now commence Nura Gumi’s Supreme Commander Nurarihyon and Youhime-san’s wedding ceremony...hmm.”

(Translator’s note: My original translation was ‘We will now commence the wedding ceremony between Nura Gumi’s Supreme Commander Nurarihyon and Youhime-san’, but then this structure will not fit in with the translation of the broken sentence later)

His voice should sound cooler. Let’s try once more with a slower speed.

“We...we will now commence...Nura Gumi’s...Su...Supreme Commander...”

“Why the heck are you producing such a dead sounding voice?”

“Wah!”

An unexpected sound came from behind him, turning around, it was the Yuki-onna Setsura standing there.

This woman, when did she appear? Even though Karasu Tengu was afraid, he still replied...

“Oh, it’s Setsura. I’m practicing my lines now.”

“Yeah, you seem really busy.”

“Yes, even though it’s really hectic, but it’s worth it. If the wedding ceremony and banquet finishes without any mistakes, everyone will praise me, Karasu Tengu, as being a great assistant to the Main House, who is able well in everything I do.”

“Is it? But you don’t have to push yourself that hard? Isn’t making one or two blunders more interesting?”

“Hey hey, don’t speak so carelessly.”

After saying that, Karasu Tengu caught a whiff of the faint smell of wine.

“...Eh? Setsura, did you drink?”

“Isn’t today an auspicious day? Why can’t I drink wine?”

Setsura said. Taking a closer look at Setsura, he realised that both her eyes are staring straight ahead, Karasu Tengu widened his eyes in fear.

“It’s not that, it’s not that, it’s not that it’s not allowed, just that the banquet hasn’t started yet...”

“What’s wrong with drinking a little. Hey, do you have any wine?”

“Eh, that is...”

Karasu Tengu stuttered, not daring to reply, and he felt very troubled about it. Looks like she was using wine as an excuse to act crazy.

He can understand Setsura’s feelings, and felt very sad for her. Without considering whether she’s a human or youkai, Setsura is also a female. Before Nurarihyon proposed to Youhime, Setsura was the closest female to the Supreme Commander. Now the Supreme Commander is going to step into the hall with another woman, and having to spend this day with a forced smile on her face was not an easy thing to do.

“Sigh, Setsura, I can understand your feelings, but don’t drink too much.”

Karasu Tengu tried using a kind tone of voice to comfort Setsura and lighten her mood, but a woman’s heart is really difficult to grasp.

“You can understand my feelings? Okay then, don’t be a Senior Supervisor anymore, drink with me now.”

The situation became even more difficult to handle.

“That is...if it’s now, that would be a bit difficult...”

“Is it, then forget it. I’ll go look for the woman to drink with me.”

“What did you say?”

“A bride who is dead drunk should be rather interesting too. I’m taking the wine.”

After Setsura said this, she roughly grabbed two, three bottles of wine. The Chokuboron which stood at the side, not daring to breathe, changed back into their Buddhist monk forms with a bang, and disappeared to another place in a puff of smoke.

Karasu Tengu quickly ran after Setsura, who was about to leave the kitchen.

“Wah! Wait a moment! You can’t let Youhime-san drink wine! She’s an important...”

“An important...what?”

Setsura turned her head towards Karasu Tengu.

“No, that is...”

“She’s an important bride, then should I, a Yuki-onna who has fallen out of love, hug the stone used to make salted vegetables and cry bitterly?”

(Translator's note: I think in some cultures, jealousy is sometimes compared to salt in vegetables)

"I didn't say that at all...sigh, how did you become like this after using wine to act crazy..."

Finally saying what he was thinking in his heart caused Setsura's inner flame to ignite.

"I'm so sorry about that! Letting you see me in this state!"

Setsura shortened the distance between them.

"You're really mean, at least allow me to drink all I can today! You say you're the Senior Supervisor, then you should also take care of me!"

"I...I have already taken very good care of you..."

This sentence also frustrated Setsura a lot.

"Damn crow, you really piss me off! Shut your crow mouth up!"

"Wah! Slow down!"

He felt the danger and wanted to run, but it was already too late.

The snowstorm blew, and Karasu Tengu turned into a snowman.

"Humph!"

Setsura turned away and left the kitchen.

Karasu Tengu, who had become a snowman, hit the ground. The youkai working in the kitchen ran over and said...

"Oh, how pretty!"

"Practically a snow art piece!"

"Should we put it on the porch as decoration?"

The group of youkai started to chat, each of them saying something.

"Idiots! Save me quickly...! And Setsura, go after her quickly...argh~~so cold!"

"Setsura-sama, calm down!"

"You can't go there!"

"Mistress, please stop!" (Translator's note: Actually, in terms of the manner of speech, it was more like "Mistress, I humbly ask you to stop please" XD)

Setsura walked along the corridor with large steps, dragging some of the youkai who were clinging onto her, but were completely unable to stop her movements. Her goal is Youhime's room.

In this era, a team of people will have to escort the bride to a place to rest on the day of the wedding, entering the groom's house only after the sun has set—that was the normal procedure, but a wedding between youkai and human would not be able to follow this rule completely, therefore before the start of the wedding, they had no choice but to allow Youhime to change her clothes (into her bridal dress) first and wait in her room.

"Let go! I'm only going there to greet her!"

Setsura said, turning her head.

Her goal was not to ridicule the bride. Karasu Tengu said that she was using wine as an excuse to act crazy, but she had no intention to go that far while drinking. She only wanted to cause a little trouble in a slightly drunk state.

--I don't think you have the caliber to be the Supreme Commander's wife. Who cares, let's see how great you are!

After saying a sentence like that to agitate the other party, then using her finger to give a gentle poke to that cute nose of hers...

Setsura, who still had a few youkai clinging to her waist, arrived in front of the door to her room. There is a human presence inside.

Setsura placed her hands on the paper door and opened the door without asking for permission.

"Hey! You..."

Setsura just froze without finishing her sentence.

Youhime had already changed into a pure white bride kimono, and was kneeling on the tatami with perfect posture. Wearing a cotton hat, and looking down slightly, she was so pretty that it became hard to breathe properly.

Youhime, wearing the pure white bride kimono, was so pretty that she looked like a flower made out of snow. That image, seems to overlap with Setsura's name.

It was the first Youhime wore a pure white bride kimono, so she seemed a little embarrassed.

"Do I...look weird?"

Youhime asked, blushing.

"It's...passable."

Setsura answered. But inwardly, she despised the change in her tone of speech.

Setsura, who was worried that her change in feelings would be seen through, suddenly started to speak aggressively.

"Youhime, let me tell you this!"

"Yes."

“You...a woman...like you...”

“Yes.”

“That is, erhm...”

The line which she thought about before was stuck in her throat, and she could not get a single word out.

After a small pause, Setsura produced a sound that could be the clicking of a tongue or the clearing of a throat, and then she made to leave the room.

“The wedding is about to start, get ready quickly, and don’t be late!”

Just as Setsura was about to leave after throwing that sentence out, Youhime asked, with what seems like a pleading tone in her voice...

“May I ask, did you come here just to say this to me...?”

“That’s right! Do you have a problem with that!”

Setsura closed the door with a ‘pa’ sound (note: meaning she did it very hard), and walked forward in a huff.

Her heart was still beating very quickly. Whether it was because she was drunk, or for other reasons, she wasn’t sure herself.

The image of the snow flower could not be erased from Setsura’s mind at all.

“What the heck, this pisses me off!”

Setsura couldn’t help but curse. Turning behind her with force, the youkai who were still clinging onto her waist were currently watching her with fearful expressions on their faces.

“You guys!”

“Yes!”

“Today I want to drink until I’m happy! You guys have to accompany me to the end, hear me!”

“HIIIIII!!” (note: pronounced “he”)

The group of youkai bundled up against each other in fright.

“Karasu Tengu, you’re still taking a bath at this time? Looks like even the Senior Supervisor can take it easy.”

Karasu Tengu was in a wooden board room near the kitchen, soaking his whole body in a metal basin of hot water. At the moment, Gyuuki came over and stood at the side.

“What are you saying, I’m not taking a bath because I want to. It’s that Setsura who went crazy again, and froze me.”

Karasu Tengu continued speaking while shivering...

“Setsura’s cold air is seriously too cold, even colder than the time in Kyoto. At first I wanted to take a bath and practice the lines for the ceremony at the same time, but...argh! Now I can’t even close my mouth, and my voice won’t come out. Gyuuki, why don’t you be the Master of Ceremony instead?”

“No thanks, I’m not suited for it.”

Gyuuki smiled as he looked down.

He thought Gyuuki would leave immediately, but unexpectedly, Gyuuki stretched out his hand and placed it on the pillar next to him, and remained rooted there, like he had something to say. But it doesn’t look like he’s willing to chat.

Karasu Tengu couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey, Gyuuki, you don’t have anything to do?” If you like to do something, go to the kitchen and wash the vegetables?”

“No, I think I’ll pass.”

Gyuuki shook his head.

“Doing something that I’m not used to would only cause trouble, same for being the Master of Ceremony. But you’re right, I really don’t know what to do.”

That’s true, Karasu Tengu nodded. Gyuuki always protected the Nura Gumi, relying on his battle strength. On the day of the wedding, a warrior would naturally not be needed.

“The wedding is about to start. You can think about the past, and be deeply moved by it.”

“The past huh...”

Gyuuki said to himself, and touched the hair covering his right eye.

“To have such achievements in just a 100 years, that is very admirable.”

Hearing Gyuuki’s deeply sincere tone, Karasu Tengu also said...

“Yeah, becoming the Lord of Pandemonium in just 100 years is really fast. And he never forced his pace. Because of his free, untouchable way of living...Ahchoo!...he gave rise to his achievements today.”

“Free huh...but, he might not be able to do so in future.”

“Gyuuki, what do you mean by that?”

“Because he is already standing at the top. During the process of climbing up, the group could be a free organization of justice. This free atmosphere can create an imposing aura, and this aura will

become a type of power. However, once reaching the top, the hunter will become the hunted, a lot more troubles compared to before will surface, or enemies will get a hold of one's weakness, and more temptations will be faced."

"That might be true."

Karasu Tengu nodded as well, agreeing.

This was the price that came with becoming the Lord of Pandemonium. In the future, more obstacles and enemies will appear in front of the Nura Gumi.

"The Supreme Commander needs to become stronger, us as well."

Karasu Tengu said, serious. Gyuuki also said, nodding...

"That's right. However, he now has a wife he needs to protect, so he will definitely get stronger. When men reach this stage, they would all become this way."

Chapter 2

When the mansion entered the evening scenery, the wedding ceremony started officially.

The seats for the bridegroom and bride have already been prepared on the raised area in the main hall, on both sides were those in charge of taking care of the newlywed couple, Karasu Tengu. On the insert in the wall, there is a Takasagono-okina, a hanging picture of an old woman as well as a tortoise ornament used as decoration. The attendees whose rank is lower than the subordinates (subordinates refer to those in the Main House who only take commands directly from Nurarihyon, like Karasu Tengu, Gyuuki and Setsura) stood at both sides of the room, leaving space in the middle to act as the walkway for the newlyweds, waiting for the main actors to enter. (Translator's note: A Takasagono-okina is a fleshy plant).

Soon after the stage was prepared, the time has arrived.

Karasu Tengu opened his mouth.

"Ghost fire."

After he said that, both sides of the walkway lit up suddenly. The ones who bought away the darkness were not candles or oil lamps, but ghost lamps who maintained a certain distance away from one another. The shadows of the attendees, under the slightly quivering fire of the ghost lamps, created ripples on the paper doors or ceiling, creating a rather mysterious atmosphere.

The lighting of the ghost lamps, is the signal for the upcoming entrance of the main lead.

The one who appeared in front of the paper door first is the Supreme Commander Nurarihyon.

Nurarihyon, who normally wore a yukata and haori, wore a formal yukata embroidered with the family symbol for today. The fitting, smart black yukata not only made the Supreme Commander look more manly, it even gave him a more imposing image.

The Supreme Commander made his way to the bridegroom's seat on the right side (when facing away from the stage) in a very relaxed manner, and sat down with one movement. He kept his eyes on the walkway he just walked through, waiting for the bride to appear. After a while, as if attracted by the many eyes on it, soft footsteps could be heard from the corridor.

Once Youhime, wearing a pure white bride kimono entered the room, all the attendees quietly produced a sound of admiration.

The bride did not have any shaman or matchmaker leading the way. Youhime, who walked towards the bride's seat alone, gave off an elegant air, and under the quivering lights of the ghost lamps, her appearance was as enthralling as being in a fantasy realm.

The bride sat down on the seat next to the groom, all the lead actors have arrived.

The General Supervisor, Karasu Tengu, announced...

"Now then, we will now begin the wedding between the Supreme Commander of the Nura Gumi Nurarihyon and Youhime-san."

Only the sound of clothes material rubbing against each other could be heard in the room, there wasn't even the sound of anything coughing. Filled with a solemn atmosphere.

The wine cups symbolizing the union of husband and wife have already been prepared. On an unpolished wooden tray, there were small, medium and large wine cups and wine flasks.

Karasu Tengu picked up the wine flasks, and filled the wine cups with wine, the bridegroom and the bride delivered the wine into their mouths one after another.

Youhime, being the last to finish the blessed wine placed the wine cup gently on the tray, her eyes met with the bridegroom at that moment.

Even though it only lasted a few seconds, but Youhime's irises, which showed slightly under the white cotton hat, showed various emotions.

The intent of love, devotion, and—

Reverence.

Reverence. It was not the sense of fear developed towards a person stronger than you.

It is a type of admiration, longing, and feelings of respect. Towards this Supreme Commander, the feeling of 'reverence' did exist in the depths of Youhime's eyes.

Youhime blushed, and lowered her head. When the Supreme Commander faced forward again, and his mouth turned into a satisfied smile, Karasu Tengu could feel the atmosphere of the room lighten up.

Seeing such a rare and precious scene of a wedding between a human and youkai, the attendees did not feel any excitement from witnessing such a marvel, those who felt anything only felt moved

from witnessing such a fortunate and happy scene. The warm feeling flowing in their chest turned into a sense of relief and spread towards the whole hall.

“Now then, Nurarihyon-sama.”

Karasu Tengu said with a formal tone of voice...

“The exchange of wine has been completed, would the bridegroom please proceed with the marriage vow.”

Nurarihyon, who was told to proceed with the marriage vow, nodded with a “Yeah”, he straightened up and decided to use a formal tone as well to say the vow. Just as he was about to open his mouth—

“Everyone from the Nura Gumi, excuse us!”

An oni, with a muscular body, barged into the room with a team of youkai.

The peaceful location was suddenly disrupted by an air of barbarity, everyone in the Nura Gumi suddenly had a change in expression.

“Where did all of you come from! Don’t you know where this is, and what day it is today! Are you trying to cause trouble!”

Karasu Tengu said, standing up. However, the staff which he always had with him was in another room. Even though it was not a hard rule, but carrying weapons are forbidden on a day of celebration. Therefore, the other members who would normally carry weapons with them are also empty handed.

“Isn’t today the grand day where your Supreme Commander is holding a wedding? We came cause trouble on purpose!”

The oni who stood at the front of the troupe shouted in anger with an uncivilised tone...

“Lord of Pandemonium? I spit! (at you) Do you think that you’re so good! After defeating all of you, we will be the Lord of Pandemonium!”

(Translator’s note: I spit! Is a literal translation from Chinese because I can’t think of any suitable phrases in English that would fit ^^|||)

The issue that Gyuuki was worried about before the wedding came true very quickly. From the hunter to the hunted, the first group of people who came looking for them would be these guys. However, having them appear today is just too fast, and it was not an honourable act, Karasu Tengu was very angry about this.

The Oni who was shouting angrily in front of his troupe may be leading tens of youkai, but they do not seem to have any connection to any faction or clan. It looks like they must be a group of wandering youkai, settled in the Kanto region, who do not belong to any group, and only gathered to attack the Nura Gumi. The Oni leading the charge did not look like the leader as well, he was probably voted to stand at the front because he is loud enough and muscular.

“We’ll fight then! Who the heck is scared of you! You half baked scumbag!”

The one who stood up and yelled was the subordinate Hitotsume. But he did not have any weapon at his waist, even his smoking pipe was placed somewhere far away.

“You spoilt the happy event of the Nura Gumi with your dirty feet, the price for doing that is really high!”

“It’s okay for you to continue shouting. All of you will be gotten rid of by us anyway, then the mansion will also be ours! Oh? The two sitting furthest in are the Supreme Commander and the bride? Then we’ll accept the bride as well! Hehehe~~!”

The Oni, who was laughing in a high pitched manner, suddenly got hit in the face by an ice block.

“Argh!”

“You don’t have to say any more crap, if you want to attack, then attack.”

Setsura said while flashing a provocative smile.

“Bitch...! I’ll kill you!”

The humiliated Oni was so angry that he turned red, and lifted his rock like fist.

“Hey, Karasu Tengu.”

It was the voice of Hitotsume.

“You won’t stop us, right?”

Hearing the question, Karasu Tengu only thought for a while, and gave his answer quickly...

“No. I am the General Supervisor, responding to fights is also my job. Okay, go and teach those unhonourable guys a lesson!”

Both sides used that as a signal and gave a battle cry, rushing towards each other in unison.

The Main Hall became a battlefield in an instant. Youhime sat on the raised platform furthest inside the room, feeling very afraid.

The formal wedding was suddenly thrown into chaos. Fists flying, kicking as well as people being sent flying or thrown aside. Every corner was filled with youkai from the Nura Gumi displaying martial arts skills against the youkai from the wandering youkai group, the scene was thrown into a whirl of angry shouts and yells.

“Ayakashi-sama!”

Youhime still addressed her own husband in this manner.

“Please stop them quickly! The wedding will be ruined!”

But at that moment, the bridegroom, wearing a formal yukata, was leaning against the decorations against the wall, with no intention of standing up at all. He even gave a look that he was enjoying it, and said to Youhime...

"Hahaha! Celebrations should be lively, isn't this good? Youhime, the formal wedding has already ended. Next, you should also enjoy this entertainment show."

"Saying that this is an entertainment show...seriously!"

Youhime lifted her small fist, but her husband did not move at all. In that case, she had no choice but to approach the normally calm Gyuuki. She looked towards the area near Gyuuki's seat and did not see any shadow, but she did see Gyuuki attacking a wandering youkai with a hand chop to the back nearby.

"Today your practice partner is Gyuuki from Mount Nejireme! Thank your gods!"

--Why did he join the fight too!

Youhime felt weak, and rather faint.

At that moment, a youkai slid on the tatami and stopped in front of Youhime. The side of his chest had a large cut.

"Oh no!"

Youhime's eyes widened, and quickly placed her hands on the youkai's wound. Youhime was originally a princess with a healing gift. After her palm let off a warm glow, the youkai's wound started to close up.

"Ohh, that's amazing!"

The youkai shouted, feeling touched.

"Hey! What are you doing! He's an enemy!"

Setsura's voice was heard suddenly from the left side. On closer inspection, Setsura was in the midst of freezing three youkai simultaneously. Youhime directed her answer towards Setsura, raising her voice...

"It doesn't matter whether they're the enemy or not! No one should be hurt on a day of celebration!"

As she said that, another injured youkai flew over. This youkai wore tattered clothing, and skinny. It was a broken bone this time, the left wrist was twisted in an odd direction.

Youhime immediately stretched out her hand of healing, and the warm light gradually joined the bone together. But the treated youkai only thanked her half heartedly before yelling and running back to the battlefield.

"Ah! No fighting--"

In the face of battle, Youhime's protests mercilessly fell on deaf ears. She didn't even have the time to sigh after that, a youkai immediately rolled over.

It was probably since then, everytime Youhime finished curing a youkai, then another youkai will appear immediately asking for help.

"It hurts~"

A long tongued youkai wearing a Hajimaki crawled over hugging its stabbed chest. (translator's note: Hajimaki is the inverted cone bamboo hat)

"It hurts it hurts it hurts!"

A youkai, with a face like a badger cried while pressing on his slashed shoulder.

"Heal me quickly!"

A ghost lady with a half burnt face crawled over while kneeling. Just as she was about to heal the rotten portion—

"That's natural! My face is meant to be that way! Just cure this part for me!"

Then she stretched out her blood covered thigh for Youhime to cure.

From this, it seems like the attacking youkai and injured youkai all knew that there is a healing princess here, so they continued to fight intentionally. Even Youhime, who helped anyone, regardless of whether they are the enemy or not, started to think that.

"Argh! My head hurts, I'm going to die!"

After helping the large Oni by closing up the head wound—

"Oh my god! How am I supposed to stand like this!"

Then helping a skeleton youkai heal all the fractures over its whole body—

"Ah~Youhime-san, I fell over!"

Then it was Natto Kozo with a bumped finger—

"It's coming out! My organs are going to spill out! Look!"

After healing the ripped abdomen of a youkai which looked like a snake, then another, and another, her healing hand could not stop at all. Slowly, Youhime felt something accumulating in her chest.

When the youkai who was the first one to be healed by her because of a slash wound in the chest area rolled over again because it was slashed in a different place, Youhime finally exploded.

"That's enough already!"

Suddenly, the melee in the Main Hall stopped.

The volcano which they thought would not erupt had spit fire. Or more appropriately, the mountain which they thought wasn't a volcano had suddenly exploded. All the youkai focused on this cute volcano wearing a pure white bride kimono.

Youhime released white smoke on all her peaks, saying at the same time...

"Relying on someone should have a limit as well! I won't help you heal your wounds anymore! Today is a day of celebration for me and Ayakashi-sama, no more fighting! Do you hear me!"

However, there was no reply from any of the youkai present. Youhime repeated once again...

"Do you hear me?"

Then she stomped on the tatami with a bang. After a short while—

"Yes..."

The youkai replied in unison. More than half of them were wearing mischievous smiles.

Just as Youhime gave a sigh of relief at the ending of the melee, Setsura came to her side and said..

"You're really something. Already like an Onee-san." (Translator's note: Onee-san here refers to female gangster leaders)

Setsura smirked, and the princess also laughed.

No feelings of embarrassment from acting undignified surfaced in her heart at all, she only felt thrilled.

Chapter 3

Youhime sat on the platform in the corridor facing the yard alone.

This place is quite near the Main Hall. The faint sounds of merry making in the wine drinking compartment can still be heard. Her face, flushed from the merry atmosphere, felt really comfortable after making contact with the cool night air.

After the melee ended, the Nura Gumi and the group of wandering youkai ended up drinking together. They were supposed to have a banquet after the end of the wedding anyway, so this result was not that unnatural.

The banquet is very lively, and the atmosphere was very cordial. Unlike the formal atmosphere during the wedding ceremony, small groups have now formed in various places, and continuous happy laughter can be heard.

There was even a live band. The songs were played by a Pipa (Chinese lute) and Guzheng (Zither) which have turned into Tsukumogami, mixed with the loud singing voices of other youkai, causing the banquet to become livelier and the night passes.

Youhime, next to Nurarihyon, laughed very happily as well. She wasn't sure how long it has been since she laughed like this, she thought ruefully as she readjusted her breathing, messed up by all the laughing.

Youhime, who felt a little tired, wanted to go get some fresh air, so she made her way outside. Silently watching the scenery in the yard, she slowly recalled her memories in Kyoto.

Born into a noble family, and lived a life where there was no worry about clothes or food, but always felt lonely inside.

When she grew up and became aware of things around her, this home was not the home in the past, and her father was not the father she knew.

After he knew that Youhime's healing power could earn a lot of money, her father changed completely. Those eyes have started to determine a person's worth in terms of money, and only wanted to know how much gold the other party has brought.

The home had turned into a gold storehouse, and her father only had eyes for money.

Now, her father is not in this world. After her father was killed by Hagoromo Gitsune's followers, Youhime did not even have time to immerse herself in grief, and was quickly captured by Hagoromo Gitsune, almost getting her liver eaten.

At that time, the one who saved Youhime was Nurarihyon. Even though he was covered in wounds, he still defeated Hagoromo Gitsune, and used those hands to hug Youhime tightly. In Nurarihyon's embrace, Youhime expressed her feelings to him.

Such a kind *person*

The feeling of wanting to become his wife solidified. But in truth, when she saw him, she honestly had a feeling that she will be following that person in the future. It sounds funny, but that was definitely what she felt.

Now, with regards to marrying into a youkai family, she did not uneasy about it anymore. Even though Nurarihyon is does things rather bluntly, but he is very kind..., even though he could not be grasped, he is very valiant. About the members of his clan, they also welcome Youhime's arrival a lot.

She finally received it. The feeling continuously flowed inside her. Not a home used to pile up gold, not a family blinded by benefits, she can finally obtain something.

As long as she prayed, her wishes would come true. God, please allow this happiness to continue forever, please don't make it disappear suddenly like a curse—

Just then, a presence drifted over to her left cheek.

"Tired?"

The Supreme Commander sat down next to Youhime, asking.

He naturally put a gentle arm around Youhime's shoulder. She lowered her head in embarrassment.

"This was an amazing wedding. I will not forget this day."

Nurarihyon said.

"Yes, me too..."

Youhime agreed, nodding.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Are you talking about...just now?"

"Yeah."

"I was praying for this happiness to not disappear forever..."

"You think it would disappear?"

Youhime tilted her head slightly.

"I don't know. But, in the life of a human, anything can happen."

"It's the same for youkai too. I didn't expect that I would get my liver dug out and eaten by a fox."

Nurarihyon laughed dryly, with one hand lightly touching the side of his chest covered by white cloth. Youhime also gave a pained look, feeling what he felt.

"Oh yes, I haven't said my vow yet."

Nurarihyon suddenly recalled, and said this to Youhime.

The vow referred to the marriage ceremony just now. Just as the bridegroom was about to say his vow, those wandering youkai suddenly barged in. And the proceedings of the vow did not continue.

"It won't disappear."

The Supreme Commander said.

"The happiness would not disappear, I will not disappear as well."

Youhime nodded. She felt both her eyes getting wet.

"Youhime, listen to me. I want you to be by my side forever, and look at me forever. I am Nurarihyon, even though my "fear" can cause me to be invisible to my enemies, but I promise, I will definitely not disappear in front of you. In your eyes, there will always be my silhouette."

"Do you understand?" Nurarihyon added this softly, then he smiled. In that instant, a light lit up in Youhime's heart, and she felt so fortunate that she almost quivered.

"Ayakashi-sama..."

Youhime called out his name. Looks like this way of addressing him would continue on for a while.

“Ayakashi-sama, I’m so happy...”

“Youhime...”

Nurarihyon brought his face closer to hers.

“You’re really beautiful. Just like a Sakura.”

The two eyes fixed on her seemed like they were seeing through the very depths of her soul. Her chest was filled with the feeling of wanting to give everything to Nurarihyon in that instant.

“Oh yeah, Youhime, do you want to take a walk outside?”

Nurarihyon said that all of a sudden, and gave a mischievous grin.

“Take a walk outside?”

“Yeah, together with my family’s Hundred Demons, to take a stroll along Edo’s streets.”

“Why—ah!”

Just as she was about to ask why, Nurarihyon had already had her in a bridal style hug in one swoop.

“I’m using the Parade of the Hundred Demons as a replacement for the bride parade. We will take the lead, and allow the Hundred Demons to follow us. It’s fun!”

Hearing Nurarihyon’s cheerful tone, Youhime couldn’t help but beam. This person, always had a way to filled her up with happiness over and over again.

Nurarihyon carried Youhime and wore his wood sandals, entered the yard, and yelled towards the Main Hall, where the banquet was still going on.

“Hey! Everyone come out now!”

Under the command of the Supreme Commander, large amounts of youkai ran out from the Main Hall and every corner of the mansion.

“What is it, Supreme Commander?”

“Oh, look! The bridegroom is carrying the bride!”

“A handsome man and beautiful lady! Awesome!”

Even though the surrounding youkai cheered with a rather rough tone, it made one feel very warm.

Nurarihyon continued to speak with awe-inspiring authority...

“Listen up! The Parade of Hundred Demons starts now! Line up behind me and Youhime, and follow!”

End

Afterword

When reading the story of Nurarihyon and Youhime, I went “Eh?” in my mind. I felt rather moved at that moment. Strange, it’s too strange. When I see the scene where the characters I created hold a wedding, I actually cried...

In the manga, there were a lot of stories within the Nura Gumi and about youkai that I did not draw. Actually, I really desire to draw all the stories, but I really can’t finish them. So I told Ohsaki-sensei that I wished to show these kind of stories. Afterwards, when I saw the manuscript of the novel, I immediately felt “Ah! That’s right! The stories that I want to draw are like this!”.

This novel uses the aftermath or prologues of events in the manga as a backbone for the stories. However, “the final touches” were done by Ohsaki-sensei. Or more appropriately, these are new stories which were created by Ohsaki-sensei’s god like writing skills, and can even be said to be entirely new “Youkai tales”.

Even though I’m a bit embarrassed to publicise the works that I have drawn, but if it’s this novel, I can recommend it confidently. I actually like youkai novels a lot already, so with regards to the youkai universe which I have created becoming a youkai novel, I definitely feel very happy. And the stories are so brilliant, it’s really great. I can’t help it but tell everyone that “This youkai novel is really interesting!”

At the same time, this year (year 2009) December, the Nurarihyon no Mago Drama CD will be released. The fact that I could invite Ohsaki-sensei to write the first novel is really fortunate. After this, I will do my best in representing the world written in the novels in the manga as well.

Cheers to an eternal Youhime!

Shiibashi Hiroshi

I am Ohsaki. Gashadokuro. Ah, I just wanted to say that word.

So what does everyone think of the novel version of “Nurarihyon no Mago”?

The volume this time collects the respective tales of Ryota Neko, Zen and Sanba Garasu, as well as the story after the battle with Hagoromo Gitsune.

Actually I like all of the stories, but my personal favourite is Zen’s story.

Zen as a person is easily well liked. Even though he is hilarious sometimes, but he can be passionate when the time asks for it. But because he is a doctor, he also has a calm side, very charismatic, and it should be appropriate if he became the main character as well.

Even though I said that, “Nurarihyon no Mago” has countless charismatic characters. Aotabou and Kurotabou, Tsurara, the Keikain family and so on, they should also have their own story. I hope I have a chance to write their story in the future, and let them be the main character.

Lastly, I will express my thanks.

Shiibashi-sensei, as well as colleagues from the editorial department, thank you for all the valuable advice, and your patience in assisting the editing of the manuscript.

As well as the readers who read this novel, thank you for all of your support.

Thank you everyone. Until next time.

Ohsaki Tomohito